



THE COMPLETE GREEK TRAGEDIES

VOLUME V

# EURIPIDES

ALCESTIS

THE MEDUSA

THE HERACLEIDAE

HIPPOLYTUS

THE CYCLOPS

HERACLES

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Edited by* DAVID GRENE and E. V. Rieu



ALCESTIS

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THE MEDEA

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HIPPOLYTUS

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THE CYCLOPS, HERACLES, IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

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William Arrowsmith

INTRODUCTION TO IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

Richmond Lattimore

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

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THE COMPLETE GREEK TRAGEDIES

VOLUME V

EURIPIDES I

ALCESTIS

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

We are told that Euripides, the son of Mnesarchus or Mnesarchides, was born at some time between 485 and 480 B.C., presented his first set of tragedies in 455, and won his first victory in 441, won only four victories during his lifetime, left Athens probably in 408 for the court of King Archelaus of Macedon, and died there late in 407 or early in 406. He wrote perhaps eighty-eight plays (twenty-two sets of four); nineteen survive under his name, though *Rhesus* may not be his.

Such seems to be the basic and believable vita (though I suspect that the dates for birth and first presentation are too early). We may ignore the fanciful gossip that passes for additional biography, but consider the critical opinions of the comic poets. The conclusion is that Euripides was only moderately successful in his own lifetime, though famous and influential after death. He won seldom but produced again and again. He was parodied and ridiculed by the comic poets more often and more brutally (and more intelligently, too) than any other literary man in Athens. This fact itself means that he made more of an impression than the now obscure competitors who must have beaten him again and again.

Plainly, he wrote shockers, and it is not enough to say that this was because he was an innovator. He was, but so were his predecessors. Aeschylus was more daring, drastic, and original; Sophocles was no serene and static classicist. Perhaps the most significant remark about Euripides and Sophocles is that supposed to have been made by Sophocles, that he himself showed men as they ought to be (or as one ought to show them) but Euripides showed them as they actually were. Whether or not Sophocles ever said this, it is true. Euripides

was basically a realist, despite contrary tendencies toward fantasy and romance. The only materials available for his tragedies were the old heroic sagas. He used them as if they told the story not of characters heroic in all dimensions, but of real everyday people. From the high legends of Jason and Heracles he chose to enact the moments of the heroes' decay and disintegration. What, he asks, does it feel like to have your wife die for you, and what kind of man will let her do it? What does it feel like to have murdered your mother? His Admetus fights hard to deceive himself, but we all see that he is a coward; his Orestes is a bad mental case with fits and seizures. Creusa, brutally violated by Apollo and then robbed of the baby she had guiltily borne, does not dance decorously out of the story like Pindar's Evadne in similar circumstances; the shame sticks with her, as if she were a real girl with a real experience; and Apollo, while managing that all comes well in the end, hides behind his temple and lets his sister speak for him.

Though the judges of Dionysus disapproved, there cannot be much doubt that the audience was fascinated even when it was not pleased. Was this enough, though? The sense of defeat and disappointment is constantly there in Euripides. It makes him bring to the fore those who are weak or oppressed, the despised and misunderstood: women, children, slaves, captives, strangers, barbarians. Women as chief characters outnumber men, and most of his choruses are female. It is not that he is "for" them or "against" them; he merely tries to present action from their point of view, and they fascinate him. So do children, but here his realism fails: obviously, he knew little about them. His servants are true to life, while his heroes who deliver the oppressed are wooden.

Euripides is sometimes perhaps more pathetic than tragic. The hero (or heroine) in Sophocles is prepared to fight stubbornly to the last; his Teucer, alone against an army full of warriors who could beat him singlehanded, acts as if he were the champion with an army at his back. Many characters of Euripides spend all their time trying to run away from something. Ion and Hippolytus are blissfully happy only while they

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

lead do-nothing lives; then the real world with its entanglements catches up with them, and they are miserable. His choruses are not the first to long for the wings of the dove, but they do it oftenest; in him the drive to escape becomes an insistent, recurrent motive. Even his own invention, bright optimistic romantic comedy, becomes drama of escape. Usually, escape is impossible. He believed in a world he disliked. His gods represent this world.

With Euripides, tragedy is either transcending itself or going into a decline, in any case turning into something else. If Euripides is less of a master in his own medium than Aeschylus and Sophocles, it is partly because he was less happy in that medium. This shows in faults which his greatest admirers will concede. His pathos may degenerate into sentimentality. There are signs of haste, slovenliness, inconsequence, windiness, in most of his best plays. Some whole plays are mediocre. His most characteristic fault is to try to get too much into a single plot or character or situation. His *Medea* is several kinds of woman unsuccessfully assembled; his *Andromache* has two badly connected plots. He wrote some lovely lyrics, but often (as in *Helen*) they have nothing to do with what is going on in the play. And so on. His faults are obvious. Equally obvious is his genius. He is the father of the romantic comedy, the problem play. He has given us a series of unforgettable characters. There has never been anyone else like him.

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*Bryn Mawr College*



ALCESTIS

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

RICHMOND LATTIMORE





# INTRODUCTION TO ALCESTIS

## *The Legend*

The origins of the story as it is told by Euripides are difficult to trace. We hear of Admetus and of Alcestis, "loveliest of all the daughters of Pelias," in the *Iliad*, but only as parents of Eumelus, one of the Achaeans at Troy. There is an allusion to the story as Euripides tells it in the *skolion* or drinking catch attributed to the little-known poetess Praxilla:

Mark the saying of Admetus, dear friend, and make friends with the brave.

Keep away from cowards, knowing that there is little grace in them.

We also know that Phrynichus, a dramatic poet of the early fifth century, used what seems to have been essentially the same version as that which Euripides followed. The best conclusion, though it is tentative, is that Euripides did not add any "facts" to the legend as he received it. The originality of the play would rather lie in the way in which he approached a known, though not particularly well-known, story from a new angle and with a new emphasis.

## *The Play*

Grant, then, the basic outline of the plot: Alcestis voluntarily dying for her husband when his father and mother would not; Alcestis and Admetus delivered by Admetus' true friend, Heracles, who is guided by the remote hand of Apollo, also a true friend of Admetus. One may emphasize the heroism of Alcestis and the staunchness of Heracles, as against the way in which mother and father fail wretchedly in the crisis. This is as far as our *skolion* goes, for whether or not "the brave"

designates both Alcestis and Heracles or only one, "cowards" means the mother and father, not Admetus himself. Admetus is merely the subject about whom these operations, of dying or refusing to die, revolve; his own character does not come into question.

Euripides took a different kind of interest. He gives Alcestis full honors. The beginning of the play is all hers, and she is the center of all memories throughout the play. If she appears cold and self-righteous, if she reserves her passion, on stage, for her children, and talks only business with Admetus, this is rather the embarrassment of being disappointed in him than coldness. Endearments addressed to Admetus at this time would be intolerable. Her true nature is brought out by what servants and others have to say about her. Pheres, the father, is effectively dealt with in his one scene. It is true he wins his argument, but all the justification in the world does not save him from being a horrible old man. But the principal character is Admetus. The theme of the drama is not "if a wife dies for her husband, how brave and devoted the wife," so much as "if a husband lets his wife die for him, what manner of man must that husband be?"

Admetus is drawn to the life, without mercy. He has all the superficial graces and sincerely loves his wife and children, but he lacks the courage to die as he ought instead of letting his wife die for him; and, further, he lacks the courage to admit, to himself or anyone else, that he ought to be dying but dare not do it. He has, however, one solid virtue. For if he and Alcestis are at last saved not by his own strength and resolution but by Heracles under authority of Apollo, yet there is good reason why these august persons should be so devoted to him. Admetus is the best of friends. The right treatment of guests is a passion, almost an obsession, with him, and in this matter his conviction makes him firm enough to override so great a man as Heracles, with a show of force quite different from his ungrounded violence against Pheres. We may call him hospitable. But if we do, we must understand that, while the lavish entertainment of visitors was a special tradition in Thessaly, the hospitality of Admetus goes far beyond this and

## INTRODUCTION

is no merely sociable virtue. Rather, this is the old Homeric *xenia*. It is one of the steps by which society progresses from savagery to civilization, when strangers make a willing, immediate, and permanent agreement to be friends. In this sense, *xenia* also includes cases at least of the nonabuse of power against those over whom one has power. Apollo, for punishment, was put at the mercy of Admetus, and Admetus gave him fair and friendly treatment (ll. 8-10; 222-24; 568-79). A different king might have reveled in his power over such a subject and acted outrageously. This is what Laomedon, king of Troy, did to Apollo and Poseidon (*Iliad* xxi. 441-60), and Poseidon never forgave him or his people. So, too, with Heracles, generous hospitality for the tramping hero becomes more than just a matter of correctness or etiquette when one thinks of such "hosts" as Procrustes, Sciron, and Antaeus. Violation of the rights of *xenia* is an underlying theme which directs the action in both the story of Troy and the story of Odysseus. The sin of Laomedon provoked divine rage against Troy; then Paris doomed the city when, after being properly received in the house of Menelaus, he went off with his host's wife and most of his furniture. Decisive for the action of the *Odyssey* is that travesty of *xenia* performed by the suitors when they settle down and make themselves intolerably at home in the house of Odysseus.

If we adopt the admittedly somewhat hypothetical scheme according to which tragedy consists in the destruction or self-destruction of an otherwise great man through some fault or flaw in his character, then *Alcestis* might be viewed as a kind of inverted tragedy. For this hero, otherwise no better than ordinary, has one significant *virtue*, which *saves* him. Thus, again, the progress of the play is from ruin to safety, reversing what might be considered the normal course of tragedy. I would not press this view, although I think there is a little truth in it, because Euripides would have had to have a formula for tragedy before he could invert it, and we do not know that he had such a formula. At any rate, the "comic" qualities of *Alcestis* have puzzled critics since ancient times. It was played fourth in the set, in the position usually given to

a satyr-play. But attempts to explain *Alcestis* as a modified satyr-play are not convincing, and the comic elements are not highly significant. Heracles may momentarily be a moderately funny drunk, but that is about all. The squabble between Admetus and Pheres, in which both really lose, is too humanly disagreeable to be funny; the squabble between Apollo and Death is grotesque, but scarcely uproarious. *Alcestis* is no satyr-play, but a tragicomedy which in part (loss, escape, reunion) anticipates the lighter escape-dramas (*Iphigeneia in Tauris*, *Helen*) still to come. But it goes deeper than these do.

### *Date and Circumstances*

*Alcestis* was presented in 438 B.C. The first three plays in the set (all lost) were *The Women of Crete*, *Alcmaeon in Psophis*, and *Telephus*. Thus *Alcestis* is the earliest extant work of Euripides, with the possible exception of *The Cyclops* and (very doubtful) *Rhesus*, which are undated. Euripides won second place, being beaten by Sophocles.

### *Text*

I have followed Murray's Oxford text, and used his line numbers, which are standard; except that I have adopted different readings which affect the translation of the following lines: 50, 124, 223, 943, 1140, 1153.



## CHARACTERS

*Apollo*

*Death*

*Chorus of citizens of Pheræ*

*Maid, attendant of Alcestis*

*Alcestis, wife of Admetus*

*Admetus of Pheræ, king of Thessaly*

*Boy (Eumelus), son of Admetus and Alcestis*

*Heracles*

*Pheres, father of Admetus*

*Servant of Admetus*

*Girl, daughter of Admetus and Alcestis (silent character)*

*Servants (silent)*

## ALCESTIS

SCENE: *Pherae, in Thessaly, before the house of Admetus.*  
*The front door of the house, or palace, is the center of*  
*the backdrop.*

*(Enter Apollo from the house, armed with a bow.)*

*Apollo*

House of Admetus, in which I, god though I am,  
had patience to accept the table of the serfs!  
Zeus was the cause. Zeus killed my son, Asclepius,  
and drove the bolt of the hot lightning through his chest.  
I, in my anger for this, killed the Cyclopes, 5  
smiths of Zeus's fire, for which my father made me serve  
a mortal man, in penance for my misdoings.  
I came to this country, tended the oxen of this host  
and friend, Admetus, son of Pheres. I have kept  
his house from danger, cheated the Fates to save his life 10  
until this day, for he revered my sacred rights  
sacredly, and the fatal goddesses allowed  
Admetus to escape the moment of his death  
by giving the lower powers someone else to die  
instead of him. He tried his loved ones all in turn, 15  
father and aged mother who had given him birth,  
and found not one, except his wife, who would consent  
to die for him, and not see daylight any more.  
She is in the house now, gathered in his arms and held  
at the breaking point of life, because the destiny marks 20  
this for her day of death and taking leave of life.  
The stain of death in the house must not be on me. I



step therefore from these chambers dearest to my love.  
 And here is Death himself, I see him coming, Death  
 who dedicates the dying, who will lead her down 25  
 to the house of Hades. He has come on time. He has  
 been watching for this day on which her death falls due.

*(Enter Death, armed with a sword, from the wing.  
 He sees Apollo suddenly and shows surprise.)*

*Death*

Ah!  
 You at this house, Phoebus? Why do you haunt  
 the place. It is unfair to take for your own 30  
 and spoil the death-spirits' privileges.  
 Was it not enough, then, that you blocked the death  
 of Admetus, and overthrew the Fates  
 by a shabby wrestler's trick? And now  
 your bow hand is armed to guard her too, 35  
 Alcestis, Pelias' daughter, though she  
 promised her life for her husband's.

*Apollo*

Never fear. I have nothing but justice and fair words for  
 you.

*Death*

If you mean fairly, what are you doing with a bow?

*Apollo*

It is my custom to carry it with me all the time. 40

*Death*

It is your custom to help this house more than you ought.

*Apollo*

But he is my friend, and his misfortunes trouble me.

*Death*

You mean to take her body, too, away from me?

*Apollo*

I never took *his* body away from you by force.

*Death*

How is it, then, that he is above ground, not below? 45

*Apollo*

He gave his wife instead, and you have come for her now.

*Death*

I have. And I shall take her down where the dead are.

*Apollo*

Take her and go. I am not sure you will listen to me.

*Death*

Tell me to kill whom I must kill. Such are my orders.

*Apollo*

No, only to put their death off. They must die in the end. 50

*Death*

I understand what you would say and what you want.

*Apollo*

Is there any way, then, for Alcestis to grow old?

*Death*

There is not. I insist on enjoying my rights too.

*Apollo*

You would not take more than one life, in any case.

*Death*

My privilege means more to me when they die young. 55

*Apollo*

If she dies old, she will have a lavish burial.

*Death*

What you propose, Phoebus, is to favor the rich.

*Apollo*

What is this? Have you unrecognized talents for debate?

*Death*

Those who could afford to buy a late death would buy it then.

*Apollo*

I see. Are you determined not to do this for me? 60

*Death*

I will not do it. And you know my character.

*Apollo*

I know it: hateful to mankind, loathed by the gods.

*Death*

You cannot always have your way where you should not.

*Apollo*

For all your brute ferocity you shall be stopped.  
The man to do it is on the way to Pheres' house  
now, on an errand from Eurystheus, sent to steal 65  
a team of horses from the wintry lands of Thrace.  
He shall be entertained here in Admetus' house  
and he shall take the woman away from you by force,  
nor will you have our gratitude, but you shall still 70  
be forced to do it, and to have my hate beside.

*Death*

Much talk. Talking will win you nothing. All the same,  
the woman goes with me to Hades' house. I go  
to take her now, and dedicate her with my sword,  
for all whose hair is cut in consecration 75  
by this blade's edge are devoted to the gods below.

ALCESTIS

*(Death enters the house. Apollo leaves by the wing. The Chorus enters and forms a group before the gates.)*

*Chorus*

It is quiet by the palace. What does it mean?  
Why is the house of Admetus so still?  
Is there none here of his family, none  
who can tell us whether the queen is dead 80  
and therefore to be mourned? Or does Pelias'  
daughter Alcestis live still, still look  
on daylight, she who in my mind appears  
noble beyond  
all women beside in a wife's duty? 85

*(Here they speak individually, not as a group.)*

*First Citizen*

Does someone hear anything?  
The sound a hand's stroke would make,  
or outcry, as if something were done  
and over?

*Second Citizen*

No. And there is no servant stationed  
at the outer gates. O Paeon, 90  
healer, might you show in light  
to still the storm of disaster.

*Third Citizen*

They would not be silent if she were dead.

*Fourth Citizen*

No, she is gone.

*Fifth Citizen*

They have not taken her yet from the house.

*Sixth Citizen*

So sure? I know nothing. Why are you certain? . 95

And how could Admetus have buried his wife  
with none by, and she so splendid?

*Seventh Citizen*

Here at the gates I do not see  
the lustral spring water, approved  
by custom for a house of death. 100

*Eighth Citizen*

Nor are there cut locks of hair at the forecourts  
hanging, such as the stroke of sorrow  
for the dead makes. I can hear no beating  
of the hands of young women.

*Ninth Citizen*

Yet this is the day appointed. 105

*Tenth Citizen*

What do you mean? Speak.

*Ninth Citizen*

On which she must pass to the world below.

*Eleventh Citizen*

You touch me deep, my heart, where it hurts.

*Twelfth Citizen*

Yes. He who from the first has claimed to be called  
a good man himself 110  
must grieve when good men are afflicted.

*(Henceforward all the Chorus together.)*

Sailing the long sea, there is  
not any place on earth  
you could win, not Lycia,  
not the unwatered sands called 115  
of Ammon, not

ALCESTIS

thus to approach and redeem the life  
of this unhappy woman. Her fate shows  
steep and near. There is no god's hearth  
I know you could reach and by sacrifice  
avail to save. 120

There was only one. If the eyes  
of Phoebus' son were opened  
still, if he could have come  
and left the dark chambers,  
the gates of Hades. 125  
He upraised those who were stricken  
down, until from the hand of God  
the flown bolt of thunder hit him.  
Where is there any hope for life  
left for me any longer? 130

For all has been done that can be done by our kings now,  
and there on all the gods' altars  
are blood sacrifices dripping in full,  
but no healing comes for the evil. 135

*(Enter a maid from the house.)*

*Chorus*

But here is a serving woman coming from the house.  
The tears break from her. What will she say has taken  
place?  
We must, of course, forgive your sorrow if something  
has happened to your masters. We should like to know  
whether the queen is dead or if she is still alive. 140

*Maid*

I could tell you that she is still alive or that she is dead.

*Chorus*

How could a person both be dead and live and see?

*Maid*

It has felled her, and the life is breaking from her now.

*Chorus*

Such a husband, to lose such a wife. I pity you.

*Maid*

The master does not see it and he will not see it  
until it happens. 145

*Chorus*

There is no hope left she will live?

*Maid*

None. This is the day of destiny. It is too strong.

*Chorus*

Surely, he must be doing all he can for her.

*Maid*

All is prepared so he can bury her in style.

*Chorus*

Let her be sure, at least, that as she dies, there dies  
the noblest woman underneath the sun, by far. 150

*Maid*

Noblest? Of course the noblest, who will argue that?  
What shall the wife be who surpasses her? And how  
could any woman show that she loves her husband more  
than herself better than by consent to die for him? 155

But all the city knows that well. You shall be told  
now how she acted in the house, and be amazed  
to hear. For when she understood the fatal day  
was come, she bathed her white body with water drawn  
from running streams, then opened the cedar chest and  
took 160

her clothes out, and dressed in all her finery  
and stood before the Spirit in the Hearth, and prayed:  
"Mistress, since I am going down beneath the ground,  
I kneel before you in this last of all my prayers.  
Take care of my children for me. Give the little girl  
a husband; give the little boy a generous wife; 165

# ALCESTIS

and do not let my children die like me, who gave them birth, untimely. Let them live a happy life through to the end and prosper here in their own land." Afterward she approached the altars, all that stand in the house of Admetus, made her prayers, and decked them all 170

with fresh sprays torn from living myrtle. And she wept not at all, made no outcry. The advancing doom made no change in the color and beauty of her face. But then, in their room, she threw herself upon the bed, and there she did cry, there she spoke: "O marriage bed it was here that I undressed my maidenhood and gave myself up to this husband for whose sake I die. 175

Goodbye. I hold no grudge. But you have been my death and mine alone. I could not bear to play him false. 180

I die. Some other woman will possess you now. She will not be better, but she might be happier." She fell on the bed and kissed it. All the coverings were drenched in the unchecked outpouring of her tears; but after much crying, when all her tears were shed, she rolled from the couch and walked away with eyes cast down, 185

began to leave the room, but turned and turned again to fling herself once more upon the bed. Meanwhile the children clung upon their mother's dress, and cried, until she gathered them into her arms, and kissed first one and then the other, as in death's farewell. 190

And all the servants in the house were crying now in sorrow for their mistress. Then she gave her hand to each, and each one took it, there was none so mean in station that she did not stop and talk with him. 195 This is what Admetus and the house are losing. Had he died, he would have lost her, but in this escape he will keep the pain. It will not ever go away.

## *Chorus*

Admetus surely must be grieving over this when such a wife must be taken away from him. 200



*Maid*

Oh yes, he is crying. He holds his wife close in his arms,  
 imploring her not to forsake him. What he wants  
 is impossible. She is dying. The sickness fades her now.  
 She has gone slack, just an inert weight on the arm.  
 Still, though so little breath of life is left in her, 205  
 she wants to look once more upon the light of the sun,  
 since this will be the last time of all, and never again.  
 She must see the sun's shining circle yet one more time.  
 Now I must go announce your presence. It is not  
 everyone who bears so much good will toward our kings 210  
 as to stand by ready to help in their distress.  
 But you have been my master's friends since long ago.  
 (Exit.)

*Chorus*

O Zeus, Zeus, what way out of this evil  
 is there, what escape from this  
 which is happening to our princes?  
 A way, any way? Must I cut short my hair 215  
 for grief, put upon me the black  
 costume that means mourning?  
 We must, friends, clearly we must; yet still  
 let us pray to the gods. The gods  
 have power beyond all power elsewhere.

Paeon, my lord, 220  
 Apollo, make some way of escape for Admetus.  
 Grant it, oh grant it. Once you found  
 rescue in him. Be now  
 in turn his redeemer from death.  
 Oppose bloodthirsty Hades. 225

*Admetus,*

O son of Pheres, what a loss  
 to suffer, when such a wife goes.  
 A man could cut his throat for this, for this  
 and less he could bind the noose upon his neck

# ALCESTIS

and hang himself. For this is 230  
 not only dear, but dearest of all,  
 this wife you will see dead  
 on this day before you.

*(Alcestis is carried from the house on a litter,  
 supported by Admetus and followed by her  
 children and servants of the household.)*

But see, see,  
 she is coming out of the house and her husband is with  
 her.

Cry out aloud, mourn, you land  
 of Pherae for the bravest 235  
 of wives fading in sickness and doomed  
 to the Death God of the world below.

I will never again say that marriage brings  
 more pleasure than pain. I judge by what 240  
 I have known in the past, and by seeing now  
 what happens to our king, who is losing a wife  
 brave beyond all others, and must live a life  
 that will be no life for the rest of time.

*Alcestis*

Sun, and light of the day,  
 O turning wheel of the sky, clouds that fly. 245

*Admetus*

The sun sees you and me, two people suffering,  
 who never hurt the gods so they should make you die.

*Alcestis*

My land, and palace arching my land,  
 and marriage chambers of Iolcus, my own country.

*Admetus*

Raise yourself, my Alcestis, do not leave me now. 250  
 I implore the gods to pity you. They have the power.

*Alcestis*

I see him there at the oars of his little boat in the lake,  
 the ferryman of the dead,  
 Charon, with his hand upon the oar,  
 and he calls me now: "What keeps you? 255  
 Hurry, you hold us back." He is urging me on  
 in angry impatience.

*Admetus*

The crossing you speak of is a bitter one for me;  
 ill-starred; it is unfair we should be treated so.

*Alcestis*

Somebody has me, somebody takes me away, do you see,  
 don't you see, to the courts 260  
 of dead men. He frowns from under dark  
 brows. He has wings. It is Death.  
 Let me go, what are you doing, let go.  
 Such is the road  
 most wretched I have to walk.

*Admetus*

Sorrow for all who love you, most of all for me  
 and for the children. All of us share in this grief. 265

*Alcestis*

Let me go now, let me down,  
 flat. I have no strength to stand.  
 Death is close to me.  
 The darkness creeps over my eyes. O children,  
 my children, you have no mother now, 270  
 not any longer. Daylight is yours,  
 my children. Look on it and be happy.

*Admetus*

Ah, a bitter word for me to hear,  
 heavier than any death of my own.  
 Before the gods, do not be so harsh 275

# ALCESTIS

as to leave me, leave your children forlorn.  
 No, up, and fight it.  
 There would be nothing left of me if you died.  
 All rests in you, our life, our not  
 having life. Your love is our worship.

## *Icestis*

Admetus, you can see how it is with me. Therefore,	280
I wish to have some words with you before I die.	
I put you first, and at the price of my own life	
made certain you would live and see the daylight. So	
I die, who did not have to die, because of you.	
I could have taken any man in Thessaly	285
I wished and lived in queenly state here in this house.	
But since I did not wish to live bereft of you	
and with our children fatherless, I did not spare	
my youth, although I had so much to live for. Yet	
your father, and the mother who bore you, gave you up,	290
though they had reached an age when it was good to die	
and good to save their son and end it honorably.	
You were their only one, and they had no more hope	
of having other children if you died. That way	
I would be living and you would live the rest of our time,	295
and you would not be alone and mourning for your wife	
and tending motherless children. No, but it must be	
that some god has so wrought that things shall be this	
way.	
So be it. But swear now to do, in recompense,	
what I shall ask you—not enough, oh, never enough,	300
since nothing is enough to make up for a life,	
but fair, and you yourself will say so, since you love	
these children as much as I do; or at least you should.	
Keep them as masters in my house, and do not marry	
again and give our children to a stepmother	305
who will not be so kind as I, who will be jealous	
and raise her hand to your children and mine. Oh no,	
do not do that, do not. That is my charge to you.	
For the new-come stepmother hates the children born	

to a first wife, no viper could be deadlier. 310

The little boy has his father for a tower of strength.

[He can talk with him and be spoken to in turn.]

But you, my darling, what will your girlhood be like,  
how will your father's new wife like you? She must not  
make shameful stories up about you, and contrive 315  
to spoil your chance of marriage in the blush of youth,  
because your mother will not be there to help you  
when you are married, not be there to give you strength  
when your babies are born, when only a mother's help  
will do.

For I must die. It will not be tomorrow, not 320  
the next day, or this month, the horrible thing will come,  
but now, at once, I shall be counted among the dead.

Goodbye, be happy, both of you. And you, my husband,  
can boast the bride you took made you the bravest wife,  
and you, children, can say, too, that your mother was  
brave. 325

### *Chorus*

Fear nothing; for I dare to speak for him. He will  
do all you ask. If he does not, the fault is his.

### *Admetus*

It shall be so, it shall be, do not fear, since you  
were mine in life, you still shall be my bride in death  
and you alone, no other girl in Thessaly 330  
shall ever be called wife of Admetus in your place.

There is none such, none so marked out in pride of birth  
nor beauty's brilliance, nor in anything else. I have  
these children, they are enough; I only pray the gods  
grant me the bliss to keep them as we could not keep you. 335  
I shall go into mourning for you, not for just  
a year, but all my life while it still lasts, my dear,  
and hate the woman who gave me birth always, detest  
my father. These were called my own people. They were  
not.

You gave what was your own and dear to buy my life 340

# ALCESTIS

and saved me. Am I not to lead a mourning life  
 when I have lost a wife like you? I shall make an end  
 of revelry and entertainment in my house,  
 the flowers and the music that were found here once.  
 No, I shall never touch the lute-strings ever again 345  
 nor have the heart to play music upon the flute  
 of Libya, for you took my joy in life with you.  
 I shall have the skilled hand of an artificer  
 make me an image of you to set in my room,  
 pay my devotions to it, hold it in my arms 350  
 and speak your name, and clasp it close against my heart,  
 and think I hold my wife again, though I do not,  
 cold consolation, I know it, and yet even so  
 I might drain the weight of sorrow. You could come  
 to see me in my dreams and comfort me. For they 355  
 who love find a time's sweetness in the visions of night.  
 Had I the lips of Orpheus and his melody  
 to charm the maiden daughter of Demeter and  
 her lord, and by my singing win you back from death,  
 I would have gone beneath the earth, and not the hound 360  
 of Pluto could have stayed me, not the ferryman  
 of ghosts, Charon at his oar. I would have brought you  
 back  
 to life. Wait for me, then, in that place, till I die,  
 and make ready the room where you will live with me,  
 for I shall have them bury me in the same chest 365  
 as you, and lay me at your side, so that my heart  
 shall be against your heart, and never, even in death  
 shall I go from you. You alone were true to me.

## Chorus

And I, because I am your friend and you  
 are mine, shall help you bear this sorrow, as I should. 370

## Alcestis

Children, you now have heard your father promise me  
 that he will never marry again and not inflict  
 a new wife on you, but will keep my memory.

*Admetus*

I promise. I will keep my promise to the end.

*Alcestis*

On this condition, take the children. They are yours. 375

*Admetus*

I take them, a dear gift from a dear hand.

*Alcestis*

And now  
you must be our children's mother, too, instead of me.

*Admetus*

I must be such, since they will no longer have you.

*Alcestis*

O children, this was my time to live, and I must go.

*Admetus*

Ah me, what shall I do without you all alone. 380

*Alcestis*

Time will soften it. The dead count for nothing at all.

*Admetus*

Oh, take me with you, for God's love, take me there too.

*Alcestis*

No, I am dying in your place. That is enough.

*Admetus*

O God, what a wife you are taking away from me.

*Alcestis*

It is true. My eyes darken and the heaviness comes. 385

ALCESTIS

*Admetus*

But I am lost, dear, if you leave me.

*Alcestis*

There is no use  
in talking to me any more. I am not there.

*Admetus*

No, lift your head up, do not leave your children thus.

*Alcestis*

I do not want to, but it is goodbye, children.

*Admetus*

Look at them, oh look at them.

*Alcestis*

No. There is nothing more. 390

*Admetus*

Are you really leaving us?

*Alcestis*

Goodbye.

*Admetus*

Oh, I am lost.

*Chorus*

It is over now. Admetus' wife is gone from us.

*Boy*

O wicked fortune. Mother has gone down there,  
father, she is not here with us  
in the sunshine any more. 395

She was cruel and went away  
and left me to live all alone.

Look at her eyes, look at her hands, so still.

Hear me, mother, listen to me, oh please, 400

listen, it is I, mother,

I your little one lean and kiss

your lips, and cry out to you.



*Admetus*

She does not see, she does not hear you. You and I  
both have a hard and heavy load to carry now. 405

*Boy*

Father, I am too small to be left alone  
by the mother I loved so much. Oh,  
it is hard for me to bear  
all this that is happening,  
and you, little sister, suffer 410  
with me too. Oh, father,  
your marriage was empty, empty, she did not live  
to grow old with you.  
She died too soon. Mother, with you gone away,  
the whole house is ruined. 415

*(Alcestis is carried into the house, followed  
by children and servants.)*

*Chorus*

Admetus, you must stand up to misfortune now.  
You are not the first, and not the last of humankind  
to lose a good wife. Therefore, you must understand  
death is an obligation claimed from all of us.

*Admetus*

I understand it. And this evil which has struck 420  
was no surprise. I knew about it long ago,  
and knowledge was hard. But now, since we must bury  
our dead,  
stay with me and stand by me, chant responsively  
the hymn of the unsacrificed-to god below.  
To all Thessalians over whom my rule extends 425  
I ordain a public mourning for my wife, to be  
observed with shaving of the head and with black robes.  
The horses that you drive in chariots and those  
you ride single shall have their manes cut short with steel,  
and there shall be no sound of flutes within the city, 430  
no sound of lyres, until twelve moons have filled and  
gone;

# ALCESTIS

for I shall never bury any dearer dead  
than she, nor any who loved me better. She deserves  
my thanks. She died for me, which no one else would do.

*(Exit into the house.)*

## Chorus

O daughter of Pelias  
my wish for you is a happy life  
in the sunless chambers of Hades. 435

Now let the dark-haired lord of Death himself, and the  
old man,

who sits at the steering oar  
and ferries the corpses, 440  
know that you are the bravest of wives, by far,  
ever conveyed across the tarn  
of Acheron in the rowboat.

Much shall be sung of you  
by the men of music to the seven-strung mountain 445  
lyre-shell, and in poems that have no music,  
in Sparta when the season turns and the month Carneian  
comes back, and the moon  
rides all the night; 450  
in Athens also, the shining and rich.  
Such is the theme of song you left  
in death, for the poets.

Oh that it were in my power  
and that I had strength to bring you 455  
back to light from the dark of death  
with oars on the sunken river.

For you, O dearest among women, you only 460  
had the hard courage  
to give your life for your husband's and save  
him from death. May the dust lie light  
upon you, my lady. And should he now take  
a new wife to his bed, he will win my horror and hatred,  
mine, and your children's hatred too. 465

His mother would not endure  
 to have her body hidden in the ground  
 for him, nor the aged father.  
 He was theirs, but they had not courage to save him.  
 Oh shame, for the gray was upon them. 470  
 But you, in the pride  
 of youth, died for him and left the daylight.  
 May it only be mine to win  
 such wedded love as hers from a wife; for this  
 is given seldom to mortals; but were my wife such, I  
 would have her  
 with me unhurt through her lifetime. 475

*(Enter Heracles from the road, travel-stained.)*

*Heracles*

My friends, people of Pherae and the villages  
 hereby, tell me, shall I find Admetus at home?

*Chorus*

Yes, Heracles, the son of Pheres is in the house.  
 But tell us, what is the errand that brings you here  
 to Thessaly and the city of Pherae once again? 480

*Heracles*

I have a piece of work to do for Eurystheus  
 of Tiryns.

*Chorus*

Where does it take you? On what far journey?

*Heracles*

To Thrace, to take home Diomedes' chariot.

*Chorus*

How can you? Do you know the man you are to meet?

*Heracles*

No. I have never been where the Bistones live. 485

ALCESTIS

*Chorus*

You cannot master his horses. Not without a fight.

*Heracles*

It is my work, and I cannot refuse.

*Chorus*

You must  
kill him before you come back; or be killed and stay.

*Heracles*

If I must fight, it will not be for the first time.

*Chorus*

What good will it do you if you overpower their master? 490

*Heracles*

I will take the horses home to Tiryns and its king.

*Chorus*

It is not easy to put a bridle on their jaws.

*Heracles*

Easy enough, unless their nostrils are snorting fire.

*Chorus*

Not that, but they have teeth that tear a man apart.

*Heracles*

Oh no! Mountain beasts, not horses, feed like that. 495

*Chorus*

But you can see their mangers. They are caked with  
blood.

*Heracles*

And the man who raises them? Whose son does he claim  
he is?

*Chorus*

Ares'. And he is lord of the golden shield of Thrace.

*Heracles*

It sounds like my life and the kind of work I do.  
 It is a hard and steep way always that I go, 500  
 having to fight one after another all the sons  
 the war god ever got him, with Lycaon first,  
 again with Cynus, and now here is a third fight  
 that I must have with the master of these horses. So—  
 I am Alcmene's son, and the man does not live 505  
 who will see me break before my enemy's attack.

*Chorus*

Here is the monarch of our country coming  
 from the house himself, Admetus.

(Enter Admetus.)

*Admetus*

Welcome and happiness  
 to you, O scion of Perseus' blood and child of Zeus.

*Heracles*

Happiness to you likewise, lord of Thessaly, 510  
 Admetus.

*Admetus*

I could wish it. I know you mean well.

*Heracles*

What is the matter? Why is there mourning and cut  
 hair?

*Admetus*

There is one dead here whom I must bury today.

*Heracles*

Not one of your children! I pray God shield them from  
 that.

ALCESTIS

*Admetus*

Not they. My children are well and living in their house. 515

*Heracles*

If it is your father who is gone, his time was ripe.

*Admetus*

No, he is still there, Heracles. My mother, too.

*Heracles*

Surely you have not lost your wife, Alcestis.

*Admetus*

Yes  
and no. There are two ways that I could answer that.

*Heracles*

Did you say that she is dead or that she is still alive? 520

*Admetus*

She is, but she is gone away. It troubles me.

*Heracles*

I still do not know what you mean. You are being  
obscure.

*Admetus*

You know about her and what must happen, do you not?

*Heracles*

I know that she has undertaken to die for you.

*Admetus*

How can she really live, then, when she has promised  
that? 525

*Heracles*

Ah, do not mourn her before she dies. Wait for the time.

*Admetus*

The point of death is death, and the dead are lost and gone.

*Heracles*

Being and nonbeing are considered different things.

*Admetus*

That is your opinion, Heracles. It is not mine.

*Heracles*

Well, but whose is the mourning now? Is it in the family? 530

*Admetus*

A woman. We were speaking of a woman, were we not?

*Heracles*

Was she a blood relative or someone from outside?

*Admetus*

No relation by blood, but she meant much to us.

*Heracles*

How does it happen that she died here in your house?

*Admetus*

She lost her father and came here to live with us. 535

*Heracles*

I am sorry,

Admetus. I wish I had found you in a happier state.

*Admetus*

Why do you say that? What do you mean to do?

*Heracles*

I mean  
to go on, and stay with another of my friends.

ALCESTIS

*Admetus*

No, my lord, no. The evil must not come to that.

*Heracles*

The friend who stays with friends in mourning is in the way.

540

*Admetus*

The dead are dead. Go on in.

*Heracles*

No. It is always wrong  
for guests to revel in a house where others mourn.

*Admetus*

There are separate guest chambers. We can take you there.

*Heracles*

Let me go, and I will thank you a thousand times.

*Admetus*

You shall not go to stay with any other man. 545  
You there: open the guest rooms which are across the  
court  
from the house, and tell the people who are there to  
provide  
plenty to eat, and make sure that you close the doors  
facing the inside court. It is not right for guests  
to have their pleasures interrupted by sounds of grief. 550

*(Heracles is ushered inside.)*

*Chorus*

Admetus, are you crazy? What are you thinking of  
to entertain guests in a situation like this?

*Admetus*

And if I had driven from my city and my house



the guest and friend who came to me, would you have  
 approved  
 of me more? Wrong. My misery would still have been 555  
 as great, and I should be inhospitable too,  
 and there would be one more misfortune added to those  
 I have, if my house is called unfriendly to its friends.  
 For this man is my best friend, and he is my host  
 whenever I go to Argos, which is a thirsty place. 560

*Chorus*

Yes, but then why did you hide what is happening here  
 if this visitor is, as you say, your best friend?

*Admetus*

He would not have been willing to come inside my house  
 if he had known what trouble I was in. I know.  
 There are some will think I show no sense in doing this. 565  
 They will not like it. But my house does not know how  
 to push its friends away and not treat them as it should.

(*He goes inside.*)

*Chorus*

O liberal and forever free-handed house of this man,  
 the Pythian himself, lyric Apollo, 570  
 was pleased to live with you  
 and had patience upon your lands  
 to work as a shepherd,  
 and on the hill-folds and the slopes 575  
 piped to the pasturing of your flocks  
 in their season of mating.  
 And even dappled lynxes for delight in his melody  
 joined him as shepherds. From the cleft of Othrys de-  
 scended 580  
 a red troop of lions,  
 and there, Phoebus, to your lyre's strain  
 there danced the bright-coated  
 fawn, adventuring from the deep 585

# ALCESTIS

bearded pines, lightfooted for joy  
in your song, in its kindness.

Therefore, your house is beyond  
all others for wealth of flocks by the sweet waters  
of Lake Boebias. For spread of cornland 590  
and pasturing range its boundary stands  
only there where the sun  
stalls his horses in dark air by the Molossians.  
Eastward he sways all to the harborless 595  
Pelian coast on the Aegaeon main.

Now he has spread wide his doors  
and taken the guest in, when his eyes were wet  
and he wept still for a beloved wife who died  
in the house so lately. The noble strain 600  
comes out, in respect for others.  
All that wisdom means is there in the noble. I stand  
in awe, and good hope has come again to my heart  
that for this godly man the end will be good. 605

*(Enter Admetus from the house, followed by  
servants with a covered litter.)*

*Admetus*

Gentlemen of Pherae, I am grateful for your company.  
My men are bearing to the burning place and grave  
our dead, who now has all the state which is her due.  
Will you then, as the custom is among us, say  
farewell to the dead as she goes forth for the last time? 610

*Chorus*

Yes, but I see your father coming now. He walks  
as old men do, and followers carry in their hands  
gifts for your wife, to adorn her in the underworld.

*(Enter Pheres, attended, from outside.)*

*Pheres*

I have come to bear your sorrows with you, son. I know,

nobody will dispute it, you have lost a wife 615  
 both good and modest in her ways. Nevertheless,  
 you have to bear it, even though it is hard to bear.  
 Accept these gifts to deck her body, bury them  
 with her. Oh yes, she well deserves honor in death.  
 She died to save your life, my son. She would not let 620  
 me be a childless old man, would not let me waste  
 away in sorrowful age deprived of you. Thereby,  
 daring this generous action, she has made the life  
 of all women become a thing of better repute  
 than it was.

O you who saved him, you who raised us up 625  
 when we were fallen, farewell, even in Hades' house  
 may good befall you.

I say people ought to marry women  
 like this. Otherwise, better not to marry at all.

### *Admetus*

I never invited you to come and see her buried,  
 nor do I count your company as that of a friend. 630  
 She shall not wear anything that you bring her.  
 She needs nothing from you to be buried in. Your time  
 to share my sorrow was when I was about to die.  
 But you stood out of the way and let youth take my place  
 in death, though you were old. Will you cry for her now? 635  
 It cannot be that my body ever came from you,  
 nor did the woman who claims she bore me and is called  
 my mother give me birth. I was got from some slave  
 and surreptitiously put to your wife to nurse.  
 You show it. Your nature in the crisis has come out. 640  
 I do not count myself as any child of yours.  
 Oh, you outpass the cowardice of all the world,  
 you at your age, come to the very last step of life  
 and would not, dared not, die for your own child. Oh, no,  
 you let this woman, married into our family, 645  
 do it instead, and therefore it is right for me  
 to call her all the father and mother that I have.  
 And yet you two should honorably have striven for

the right of dying for your child. The time of life  
 you had left for your living was short, in any case, 650  
 and she and I would still be living out our time  
 and I should not be hurt and grieving over her.  
 And yet, all that a man could have to bless his life  
 you have had. You had your youth in kingship. There  
 was I  
 your son, ready to take it over, keep your house 655  
 in order, so you had no childless death to fear,  
 with the house left to be torn apart by other claims.  
 You cannot justify your leaving me to death  
 on grounds that I disrespected your old age. Always I  
 showed all consideration. See what thanks I get 660  
 from you and from the woman who gave me birth. Go on,  
 get you other children, you cannot do it too soon,  
 who will look after your old age, and lay you out  
 when you are dead, and see you buried properly.  
 I will not do it. This hand will never bury you. 665  
 I am dead as far as you are concerned, and if, because  
 I found another savior, I still look on the sun,  
 I count myself that person's child and fond support.  
 It is meaningless, the way the old men pray for death  
 and complain of age and the long time they have to live. 670  
 Let death only come close, not one of them still wants  
 to die. Their age is not a burden any more.

*Chorus*

Stop, stop. We have trouble enough already, child.  
 You will exasperate your father with this talk.

*Pheres*

My son, what do you take me for that you address me 675  
 like this? Some Lydian slave, some Phrygian that you  
 bought?  
 I am a free Thessalian noble, nobly born  
 from a Thessalian. Are you forgetting that? You go  
 too far with your high-handedness. You volley brash  
 words at me, and fail to hit me, and then run away. 680

I gave you life, and made you master of my house,  
 and raised you. I am not obliged to die for you.  
 I do not acknowledge any tradition among us  
 that fathers should die for their sons. That is not Greek.  
 Your natural right is to find your own happiness 685  
 or unhappiness. All you deserve from me, you have.  
 You are lord of many. I have wide estates of land  
 to leave you, just as my father left them to me.  
 What harm have I done you then? What am I taking  
 away  
 from you? Do not die for me, I will not die for you. 690  
 You like the sunlight. Don't you think your father does?  
 I count the time I have to spend down there as long,  
 and the time to live is little, but that little is sweet.  
 You fought shamelessly for a way to escape death,  
 and passed your proper moment, and are still alive 695  
 because you killed her. Then, you wretch, you dare to call  
 me coward, when you let your woman outdare you,  
 and die for her magnificent young man? I see.  
 You have found a clever scheme by which you *never* will  
 die.  
 You will always persuade the wife you have at the time 700  
 to die for you instead. And you, so low, then dare  
 blame your own people for not wanting to do this.  
 Silence. I tell you, as you cherish your own life,  
 all other people cherish theirs. And if you call  
 us names, you will be called names, and the names are  
 true. 705

*Chorus*

Too much evil has been said in this speech and in  
 that spoken before. Old sir, stop cursing your own son.

*Admetus*

No, speak, and I will speak too. If it hurts to hear  
 the truth, you should not have made a mistake with me.

*Pheres*

I should have made a mistake if I had died for you. 710

ALCESTIS

*Admetus*

Is it the same thing to die old and to die young?

*Pheres*

Yes. We have only one life and not two to live.

*Admetus*

I think you would like to live a longer time than Zeus.

*Pheres*

Cursing your parents, when they have done nothing to  
you?

*Admetus*

Yes, for I found you much in love with a long life. 715

*Pheres*

Who is it you are burying? Did not someone die?

*Admetus*

And that she died, you foul wretch, proves your cowardice.

*Pheres*

You cannot say that we were involved in her death.

*Admetus*

Ah.

I hope that some day you will stand in need of me. 720

*Pheres*

Go on, and court more women, so they all can die.

*Admetus*

Your fault. You were not willing to.

*Pheres*

No, I was not.

It is a sweet thing, this God's sunshine, sweet to see.

*Admetus*

That is an abject spirit, not a man's.

*Pheres*

You shall  
not mock an old man while you carry out your dead.

*Admetus*

You will die in evil memory, when you do die. 725

*Pheres*

I do not care what they say of me when I am dead.

*Admetus*

How old age loses all the sense of shame.

*Pheres*

She was  
not shameless, you found; she was only innocent.

*Admetus*

Get out of here now and let me bury my dead.

*Pheres*

I'll go. You murdered her, and you can bury her. 730  
But you will have her brothers still to face. You'll pay,  
for Acastus is no longer counted as a man  
unless he sees you punished for his sister's blood.

*Admetus*

Go and be damned, you and that woman who lives with  
you.

Grow old as you deserve, childless, although your son 735  
still lives. You shall not come again under the same roof  
with me. And if I had to proclaim by heralds that I  
disowned my father's house, I should have so proclaimed.

*(Pheres goes off.)*

Now we, for we must bear the sorrow that is ours,  
 shall go, and lay her body on the burning place. 740

*Chorus*

Ah, cruel the price of your daring,  
 O generous one, O noble and brave,  
 farewell. May Hermes of the world below  
 and Hades welcome you. And if, even there,  
 the good fare best, may you have high honor 745  
 and sit by the bride of Hades.

*(The body is borne off, followed by Admetus, servants,  
 and Chorus. Thus the stage is empty. Then  
 enter, from the house, the servant who was  
 put in charge of Heracles.)*

*Servant*

I have known all sorts of foreigners who have come in  
 from all over the world here to Admetus' house,  
 and I have served them dinner, but I never yet  
 have had a guest as bad as this to entertain. 750  
 In the first place, he could see the master was in  
 mourning,  
 but inconsiderately came in anyway.  
 Then, he refused to understand the situation  
 and be content with anything we could provide,  
 but when we failed to bring him something, demanded it, 755  
 and took a cup with ivy on it in both hands  
 and drank the wine of our dark mother, straight, until  
 the flame of the wine went all through him, and heated  
 him,  
 and then he wreathed branches of myrtle on his head  
 and howled, off key. There were two kinds of music now 760  
 to hear, for while he sang and never gave a thought  
 to the sorrows of Admetus, we servants were mourning  
 our mistress; but we could not show before our guest  
 with our eyes wet. Admetus had forbidden that.  
 So now I have to entertain this guest inside, 765



this ruffian thief, this highwayman, whatever he is,  
 while she is gone away from the house, and I could not  
 say goodbye, stretch my hand out to her in my grief  
 for a mistress who was like a mother to all the house  
 and me. She gentled her husband's rages, saved us all 770  
 from trouble after trouble. Am I not then right  
 to hate this guest who has come here in our miseries?

*(Enter Heracles from the house, drunk, but  
 not hopelessly so.)*

**Heracles**

You there, with the sad and melancholy face, what is  
 the matter with you? The servant who looks after guests  
 should be polite and cheerful and not scowl at them. 775  
 But look at you. Here comes your master's dearest friend  
 to visit you, and you receive him with black looks  
 and frowns, all because of some trouble somewhere else.  
 Come here, I'll tell you something that will make you  
 wise.

Do you really know what things are like, the way they  
 are? 780

I don't think so. How could you? Well then, listen to me.  
 Death is an obligation which we all must pay.  
 There is not one man living who can truly say  
 if he will be alive or dead on the next day.

Fortune is dark; she moves, but we cannot see the way  
 nor can we pin her down by science and study her. 785

There, I have told you. Now you can understand. Go on,  
 enjoy yourself, drink, call the life you live today  
 your own, but only that, the rest belongs to chance.

Then, beyond all gods, pay your best attentions to 790  
 the Cyprian, man's sweetest. There's a god who's kind.

Let all this business go and do as I prescribe  
 for you, that is, if I seem to talk sense. Do I?

I think so. Well, then, get rid of this too-much grief,  
 put flowers on your head and drink with us, fight down 795  
 these present troubles; later, I know very well  
 that the wine splashing in the bowl will shake you loose

ALCESTIS

from these scowl-faced looks and the tension in your  
mind.

We are only human. Our thoughts should be human too,  
since, for these solemn people and these people who  
scowl,

800

the whole parcel of them, if I am any judge,  
life is not really life but a catastrophe.

*Servant*

I know all that. But we have troubles on our hands  
now, that make revelry and laughter out of place.

*Heracles*

The dead woman is out of the family. Do not mourn  
too hard. The master and the mistress are still alive.

805

*Servant*

What do you mean, alive? Do you not know what  
happened?

*Heracles*

Certainly, unless your master has lied to me.

*Servant*

He is too hospitable, too much.

*Heracles*

Should I not then  
have enjoyed myself, because some outside woman was  
dead?

810

*Servant*

She was an outsider indeed. That is too true.

*Heracles*

Has something happened that he did not tell me about?

*Servant*

Never mind. Go. Our masters' sorrows are our own.

*Heracles*

These can be no outsiders' troubles.

*Servant*

If they were,  
I should not have minded seeing you enjoy yourself. 815

*Heracles*

Have I been scandalously misled by my own friends?

*Servant*

You came here when we were not prepared to take in  
guests.

You see, we are in mourning. You can see our robes  
of black, and how our hair is cut short.

*Heracles*

Who is dead?  
The aged father? One of the children who is gone? 820

*Servant*

My lord, Admetus' wife is dead.

*Heracles*

What are you saying?  
And all this time you were making me comfortable?

*Servant*

He could not bear to turn you from this house of his.

*Heracles*

My poor Admetus, what a helpmeet you have lost!

*Servant*

We are all dead and done for now, not only she. 825

*Heracles*

I really knew it when I saw the tears in his eyes,

# ALCESTIS

his shorn hair and his face; but he persuaded me  
 with talk of burying someone who was not by blood  
 related. So, unwillingly, I came inside  
 and drank here in the house of this hospitable man 830  
 when he was in this trouble! Worse, I wreathed my head  
 with garlands, and drank freely. But you might have said  
 something about this great disaster in the house.  
 Now, where shall I find her? Where is the funeral being  
 held?

## Servant

Go straight along the Larisa road, and when you clear 835  
 the city you will see the monument and the mound.

*(He goes into the house, leaving Heracles alone  
 on the stage.)*

## Heracles

O heart of mine and hand of mine, who have endured  
 so much already, prove what kind of son it was  
 Alcmene, daughter of Electryon, bore to Zeus  
 in Tiryns. I must save this woman who has died 840  
 so lately, bring Alcestis back to live in this house,  
 and pay Admetus all the kindness that I owe.  
 I must go there and watch for Death of the black robes,  
 master of dead men, and I think I shall find him  
 drinking the blood of slaughtered beasts beside the grave. 845  
 Then, if I can break suddenly from my hiding place,  
 catch him, and hold him in the circle of these arms,  
 there is no way he will be able to break my hold  
 on his bruised ribs, until he gives the woman up  
 to me. But if I miss my quarry, if he does not come 850  
 to the clotted offering, I must go down, I must ask  
 the Maiden and the Master in the sunless homes  
 of those below; and I have confidence I shall bring  
 Alcestis back, and give her to the arms of my friend  
 who did not drive me off but took me into his house 855  
 and, though he staggered under the stroke of  
 circumstance,

hid it, for he was noble and respected me.  
 Who in all Thessaly is a truer friend than this?  
 Who in all Greece? Therefore, he must not ever say  
 that, being noble, he befriended a worthless man. 860

*(He goes out. Presently Admetus comes on,  
 followed by the Chorus.)*

*Admetus*

Hateful is this  
 return, hateful the sight of this house  
 widowed, empty. Where shall I go?  
 Where shall I stay? What shall I say?  
 How can I die?  
 My mother bore me to a heavy fate. 865  
 I envy the dead. I long for those  
 who are gone, to live in their houses, with them.  
 There is no pleasure in the sunshine  
 nor the feel of the hard earth under my feet.  
 Such was the hostage Death has taken 870  
 from me, and given to Hades.

*(As they chant this, Admetus moans inarticulately.)*

*Chorus*

Go on, go on. Plunge in the deep of the house.  
 What you have suffered is enough for tears.  
 You have gone through pain, I know,  
 but you do no good to the woman who lies 875  
 below. Never again to look on the face  
 of the wife you loved hurts you.

*Admetus*

You have opened the wound torn in my heart.  
 What can be worse for a man than to lose  
 a faithful wife. I envy those 880  
 without wives, without children. I wish I had not  
 ever married her, lived with her in this house.  
 We have each one life. To grieve for this  
 is burden enough.

When we could live single all our days 885  
without children, it is not to be endured  
to see children sicken or married love  
despoiled by death.

(*As before.*)

*Chorus*

Chance comes. It is hard to wrestle against it.  
There is no limit to set on your pain. 890  
The weight is heavy. Yet still  
bear up. You are not the first man to lose  
his wife. Disaster appears, to crush  
one man now, but afterward another.

*Admetus*

How long my sorrows, the pain for my loves 895  
down under the earth.  
Why did you stop me from throwing myself  
in the hollow cut of the grave, there to lie  
dead beside her, who was best on earth?  
Then Hades would have held fast two lives, 900  
not one, and the truest of all, who crossed  
the lake of the dead together.

*Chorus*

There was a man  
of my people, who lost a boy  
any house would mourn for, 905  
the only child. But still  
he carried it well enough, though childless,  
and he stricken with age  
and the hair gray on him,  
well on through his lifetime. 910

*Admetus*

O builded house, how shall I enter you?  
How live, with this turn  
of my fortune? How different now and then.  
Then it was with Pelian pine torches, 915

with marriage songs, that I entered my house,  
 with the hand of a sweet bride on my arm,  
 with loud rout of revelers following  
 to bless her who now is dead, and me,  
 for our high birth, for nobilities 920  
 from either side which were joined in us.  
 Now the bridal chorus has changed for a dirge,  
 and for white robes the costumed black  
 goes with me inside  
 to where her room stands deserted. 925

*Chorus*

Your luck had been  
 good, so you were inexperienced when  
 grief came. Still you saved  
 your own life and substance.  
 Your wife is dead, your love forsaken. 930  
 What is new in this? Before  
 now death has parted  
 many from their wives.

*Admetus*

Friends, I believe my wife is happier than I 935  
 although I know she does not seem to be. For her,  
 there will be no more pain to touch her ever again.  
 She has her glory and is free from much distress.  
 But I, who should not be alive, who have passed by  
 my moment, shall lead a sorry life. I see it now. 940  
 How can I bear to go inside this house again?  
 Whom shall I speak to, who will speak to me, to give  
 me any pleasure in coming home? Where shall I turn?  
 The desolation in my house will drive me out  
 when I see my wife's bed empty, when I see the chairs 945  
 she used to sit in, and all about the house the floor  
 unwashed and dirty, while the children at my knees  
 huddle and cry for their mother and the servants mourn  
 their mistress and remember what the house has lost.  
 So it will be at home, but if I go outside 950

# ALCESTIS

meeting my married friends in Thessaly, the sight  
of their wives will drive me back, for I cannot endure  
to look at my wife's agemates and the friends of her  
youth.

And anyone who hates me will say this of me:  
"Look at the man, disgracefully alive, who dared 955  
not die, but like a coward gave his wife instead  
and so escaped death. Do you call him a man at all?  
He turns on his own parents, but he would not die  
himself." Besides my other troubles, they will speak  
about me thus. What have I gained by living, friends, 960  
when reputation, life, and action all are bad?

## Chorus

I myself, in the transports  
of mystic verses, as in study  
of history and science, have found  
nothing so strong as Compulsion, 965  
nor any means to combat her,  
not in the Thracian books set down  
in verse by the school of Orpheus,  
not in all the remedies Phoebus has given the heirs 970  
of Asclepius to fight the many afflictions of man.

She alone is a goddess  
without altar or image to pray  
before. She heeds no sacrifice. 975  
Majesty, bear no harder  
on me than you have in my life before!  
All Zeus even ordains  
only with you is accomplished.  
By strength you fold and crumple the steel of the  
Chalybes. 980  
There is no pity in the sheer barrier of your will.

*(They turn and speak directly to Admetus, who  
remains in the background.)*



Now she has caught your wife in the breakless grip of her hands.

Take it. You will never bring back, by crying, 985  
the dead into the light again.

Even the sons of the gods fade  
and go in death's shadow. 990

She was loved when she was with us.

She shall be loved still, now she is dead.

It was the best of all women to whom you were joined in marriage.

The monument of your wife must not be counted among  
the graves 995

of the dead, but it must be given its honors  
as gods are, worship of wayfarers.

And as they turn the bend of the road 1000  
and see it, men shall say:

"She died for the sake of her husband.

Now she is a blessed spirit.

Hail, majesty, be gracious to us." Thus will men speak in  
her presence. 1005

But here is someone who looks like Alcmene's son,  
Admetus. He seems on his way to visit you.

*(Heracles enters, leading a veiled woman by  
the hand.)*

*Heracles*

A man, Admetus, should be allowed to speak his mind  
to a friend, instead of keeping his complaints suppressed  
inside him. Now, I thought I had the right to stand 1010

beside you and endure what you endured, so prove  
my friendship. But you never told me that she, who lay  
dead, was your wife, but entertained me in your house  
as if your mourning were for some outsider's death.

And so I wreathed my head and poured libations out 1015  
to the gods, in your house, though your house had  
suffered so.

This was wrong, wrong I tell you, to have treated me  
 thus, though I have no wish to hurt you in your grief.  
 Now, as for the matter of why I have come back again,  
 I will tell you. Take this woman, keep her safe for me, 1020  
 until I have killed the master of the Bistones  
 and come back, bringing with me the horses of Thrace.  
 If I have bad luck—I hope not, I hope to come  
 back home—I give her to the service of your house.  
 It cost a struggle for her to come into my hands. 1025  
 You see, I came on people who were holding games  
 for all comers, with prizes which an athlete might  
 well spend an effort winning.

*(Points to the woman.)*

Here is the prize I won  
 and bring you. For the winners in the minor events  
 were given horses to take away, while those who won 1030  
 the heavier stuff, boxing and wrestling, got oxen,  
 and a woman was thrown in with them. Since I happened  
 to be there, it seemed wrong to let this splendid prize  
 go by. As I said, the woman is for you to keep.  
 She is not stolen. It cost me hard work to bring 1035  
 her here. Some day, perhaps, you will say I have done  
 well.

*Admetus*

I did not mean to dishonor nor belittle you  
 when I concealed the fate of my unhappy wife,  
 but it would have added pain to pain already there  
 if you had been driven to shelter with some other host. 1040  
 This sorrow is mine. It is enough for me to weep.  
 As for the woman, if it can be done, my lord,  
 I beg you, have some other Thessalian, who has not  
 suffered as I have, keep her. You have many friends  
 in Pherae. Do not bring my sorrows back to me. 1045  
 I would not have strength to see her in my house and  
 keep  
 my eyes dry. I am weak now. Do not add weakness

to my weakness. I have sorrow enough to weigh me down.  
And where could a young woman live in this house? For  
she is young, I can see it in her dress, her style. 1050

Am I to put her in the same quarters with the men?  
And how, circulating among young men, shall she be kept  
from harm? Not easy, Heracles, to hold in check  
a young strong man. I am thinking of your interests.  
Or shall I put her in my lost wife's chamber, keep 1055  
her there? How can I take her to Alcestis' bed?

I fear blame from two quarters, from my countrymen  
who might accuse me of betraying her who helped  
me most, by running to the bed of another girl,  
and from the dead herself. Her honor has its claim 1060  
on me. I must be very careful. You, lady,

whoever you are, I tell you that you have the form  
of my Alcestis; all your body is like hers.  
Too much. Oh, for God's pity, take this woman away  
out of my sight. I am beaten already, do not beat 1065  
me again. For as I look on her, I think I see  
my wife. It churns my heart to tumult, and the tears  
break streaming from my eyes. How much must I endure  
the bitter taste of sorrow which is still so fresh?

*Chorus*

I cannot put a good name to your fortune; yet 1070  
whoever you are, you must endure what the god gives.

*Heracles*

I only wish that my strength had been great enough  
for me to bring your wife back from the chambered deep  
into the light. I would have done that grace for you.

*Admetus*

I know you would have wanted to. Why speak of it? 1075  
There is no way for the dead to come back to the light.

*Heracles*

Then do not push your sorrow. Bear it as you must.

ALCESTIS

*Admetus*

Easier to comfort than to suffer and be strong.

*Heracles*

But if you wish to mourn for always, what will you gain?

*Admetus*

Nothing. I know it. But some impulse of my love 1080  
makes me.

*Heracles*

Why, surely. Love for the dead is cause for tears.

*Admetus*

Her death destroyed me, even more than I can say.

*Heracles*

You have lost a fine wife. Who will say you have not?

*Admetus*

So fine  
that I, whom you see, never shall be happy again.

*Heracles*

Time will soften it. The evil still is young and strong. 1085

*Admetus*

You can say time will soften it, if time means death.

*Heracles*

A wife, love, your new marriage will put an end to this.

*Admetus*

Silence! I never thought you would say a thing like that.

*Heracles*

What? You will not remarry but keep an empty bed?

*Admetus*

No woman ever shall sleep in my arms again. 1090

*Heracles*

Do you believe you help the dead by doing this?

*Admetus*

Wherever she may be, she deserves my honors still.

*Heracles*

Praiseworthy, yes, praiseworthy. And yet foolish, too.

*Admetus*

Call me so, then, but never call me a bridegroom.

*Heracles*

I admire you for your faith and love you bear your wife. 1095

*Admetus*

Let me die if I betray her, though she is gone.

*Heracles*

Well then,  
receive this woman into your most generous house.

*Admetus*

Please, in the name of Zeus your father, no!

*Heracles*

And yet  
you will be making a mistake if you do not;

*Admetus*

and eaten at the heart with anguish if I do. 1100

*Heracles*

ObeY. The grace of this may come where you need grace.

*Admetus*

Ah.  
I wish you had never won her in those games of yours.

*Heracles*

Where I am winner, you are winner along with me.

*Admetus*

Honorably said. But let the woman go away.

*Heracles*

She will go, if she should. First look. See if she should. 1105

*Admetus*

She should, unless it means you will be angry with me.

*Heracles*

Something I know of makes me so insistent with you.

*Admetus*

So, have your way. But what you do does not please me.

*Heracles*

The time will come when you will thank me. Only obey.

*Admetus (to attendants)*

Escort her in, if she must be taken into this house. 1110

*Heracles*

I will not hand this lady over to attendants.

*Admetus*

You yourself lead her into the house then, if you wish.

*Heracles*

I will put her into your hands and into yours alone.

*Admetus*

I will not touch her. But she is free to come inside.

*Heracles*

No, I have faith in your right hand, and only yours. 1115

EURIPIDES

*Admetus*

My lord, you are forcing me to act against my wish.

*Heracles*

Be brave. Reach out your hand and take the stranger's.

*Admetus*

So.

Here is my hand; I feel like Perseus killing the gorgon.

*Heracles*

You have her?

*Admetus*

Yes, I have her.

*Heracles*

Keep her, then. Some day  
you will say the son of Zeus came as your generous guest. 1120  
But look at her. See if she does not seem most like  
your wife. Your grief is over now. Your luck is back.

*Admetus*

Gods, what shall I think! Amazement beyond hope, as I  
look on this woman, this wife. Is she really mine,  
or some sweet mockery for God to stun me with? 1125

*Heracles*

Not so. This is your own wife you see. She is here.

*Admetus*

Be careful she is not some phantom from the depths.

*Heracles*

The guest and friend you took was no necromancer.

*Admetus*

Do I see my wife, whom I was laying in the grave?

# ALCESTIS

*Heracles*

Surely. But I do not wonder at your unbelief. 1130

*Admetus*

May I touch her, and speak to her, as my living wife?

*Heracles*

Speak to her. All that you desired is yours.

*Admetus*

Oh, eyes  
and body of my dearest wife, I have you now  
beyond all hope. I never thought to see you again.

*Heracles*

You have her. May no god hate you for your happiness. 1135

*Admetus*

O nobly sprung child of all-highest Zeus, may good  
fortune go with you. May the father who gave you birth  
keep you. You alone raised me up when I was down.  
How did you bring her back from down there to the  
light?

*Heracles*

I fought a certain deity who had charge of her. 1140

*Admetus*

Where do you say you fought this match with Death?

*Heracles*

Beside  
the tomb itself. I sprang and caught him in my hands.

*Admetus*

But why is my wife standing here, and does not speak?

*Heracles*

You are not allowed to hear her speak to you until



her obligations to the gods who live below 1145  
 are washed away. Until the third morning comes. So now  
 take her and lead her inside, and for the rest of time,  
 Admetus, be just. Treat your guests as they deserve.  
 And now goodbye. I have my work that I must do,  
 and go to face the lordly son of Sthenelus. 1150

*Admetus*

No, stay with us and be the guest of our hearth.

*Heracles*

There still  
 will be a time for that, but I must press on now.

*Admetus*

Success go with you. May you find your way back here.

*(Heracles goes.)*

I proclaim to all the people of my tetrarchy  
 that, for these blessed happenings, they shall set up  
 dances, and the altars smoke with sacrifice offered. 1155  
 For now we shall make our life again, and it will be  
 a better one.

I was lucky. That I cannot deny.

*(He takes Alcestis by the hand and leads  
 her inside the house.)*

*Chorus (going)*

Many are the forms of what is unknown.  
 Much that the gods achieve is surprise. 1160  
 What we look for does not come to pass;  
 God finds a way for what none foresaw.  
 Such was the end of this story.

# THE MEDEA

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

REX WARNER



## INTRODUCTION TO THE MEDEA

The Athenian audience who saw the first performance of Euripides' *Medea* at the state dramatic contest in 431 B.C. and who awarded the third prize to Euripides would have been familiar with the whole story of the chief characters, and we, twenty-three centuries later, are handicapped in our understanding of the play if we have not at least some knowledge of the same story.

The Athenians would have known *Medea* as a barbarian princess and as a sorceress, related to the gods. She came from the faraway land of Colchis at the eastern extremity of the Black Sea, where her father, King Aeetes, a sorcerer himself and the son of Helios, god of the sun, kept the Golden Fleece. Here Jason had come with the Argonauts, the first expedition of western Greeks against the eastern barbarians. *Medea* had fallen in love with him, and by her aid he was able to avoid the traps laid for him by Aeetes, to regain the Golden Fleece, and to escape, taking *Medea* with him. She, to assist the escape, had murdered her own brother, strewing the pieces of his body over the water so that her father's fleet, while collecting the fragments for burial, might lose time in the pursuit of the fugitives.

*Medea* and Jason then settled in Jason's hereditary kingdom of Iolcus, where Pelias, his uncle, still cheated him of his rights. *Medea*, hoping to do Jason a favor, persuaded the daughters of Pelias to attempt, under her guidance, a magic rejuvenation of their father. The old man was to be killed, cut in pieces, and then, with the aid of herbs and incantations, restored to his first youth. The unsuspecting daughters did as they were told, and *Medea* left them with their father's blood

upon their hands. However, the result of this crime was no advancement for Jason but rather exile for him, Medea, and their two children.

From Iolcus they came to Corinth, the scene of Euripides' play. Here Jason, either, as he says himself, wishing to strengthen his own economic position, or, as Medea thinks, because he was tired of his dangerous foreign wife, put her aside and married the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth. It is at this point that the action of the play begins; but the Athenian audience would know well enough what the plot would be. They would know that Medea, in her jealous rage, would destroy both Creon and his daughter by means of a poisoned robe which clung to the flesh and burned it; that, despairing of her children's safety and wishing through them to injure Jason in every way, she would kill them with her own hands; and that, finally, by supernatural means, she would escape to their own city and take refuge with the old King Aegeus.



C H A R A C T E R S

*Medea, princess of Colchis and wife of  
Jason, son of Aeson, king of Iolcus  
Two children of Medea and Jason  
Creon, king of Corinth  
Aegeus, king of Athens  
Nurse to Medea  
Tutor to Medea's children  
Messenger  
Chorus of Corinthian Women*

## THE MEDEA

SCENE: *In front of Medea's house in Corinth. Enter from the house Medea's nurse.*

*Nurse*

How I wish the Argo never had reached the land  
Of Colchis, skimming through the blue Symplegades,  
Nor ever had fallen in the glades of Pelion  
The smitten fir-tree to furnish oars for the hands  
Of heroes who in Pelias' name attempted 5  
The Golden Fleece! For then my mistress Medea  
Would not have sailed for the towers of the land of Iolcus,  
Her heart on fire with passionate love for Jason;  
Nor would she have persuaded the daughters of Pelias  
To kill their father, and now be living here 10  
In Corinth with her husband and children. She gave  
Pleasure to the people of her land of exile,  
And she herself helped Jason in every way.  
This is indeed the greatest salvation of all—  
For the wife not to stand apart from the husband. 15  
But now there's hatred everywhere, Love is diseased.  
For, deserting his own children and my mistress,  
Jason has taken a royal wife to his bed,  
The daughter of the ruler of this land, Creon.  
And poor Medea is slighted, and cries aloud on the 20  
Vows they made to each other, the right hands clasped  
In eternal promise. She calls upon the gods to witness  
What sort of return Jason has made to her love.  
She lies without food and gives herself up to suffering,



Wasting away every moment of the day in tears. 25  
 So it has gone since she knew herself slighted by him.  
 Not stirring an eye, not moving her face from the ground,  
 No more than either a rock or surging sea water  
 She listens when she is given friendly advice.  
 Except that sometimes she twists back her white neck and 30  
 Moans to herself, calling out on her father's name,  
 And her land, and her home betrayed when she came  
 away with  
 A man who now is determined to dishonor her.  
 Poor creature, she has discovered by her sufferings  
 What it means to one not to have lost one's own country. 35  
 She has turned from the children and does not like to see  
 them.  
 I am afraid she may think of some dreadful thing,  
 For her heart is violent. She will never put up with  
 The treatment she is getting. I know and fear her  
 Lest she may sharpen a sword and thrust to the heart, 40  
 Stealing into the palace where the bed is made,  
 Or even kill the king and the new-wedded groom,  
 And thus bring a greater misfortune on herself.  
 She's a strange woman. I know it won't be easy  
 To make an enemy of her and come off best. 45  
 But here the children come. They have finished playing.  
 They have no thought at all of their mother's trouble.  
 Indeed it is not usual for the young to grieve.

(*Enter from the right the slave who is the tutor  
 to Medea's two small children. The  
 children follow him.*)

*Tutor*

You old retainer of my mistress' household,  
 Why are you standing here all alone in front of the 50  
 Gates and moaning to yourself over your misfortune?  
 Medea could not wish you to leave her alone.

*Nurse*

Old man, and guardian of the children of Jason,

THE MEDEA

If one is a good servant, it's a terrible thing  
When one's master's luck is out; it goes to one's heart. 55  
So I myself have got into such a state of grief  
That a longing stole over me to come outside here  
And tell the earth and air of my mistress' sorrows.

*Tutor*

Has the poor lady not yet given up her crying?

*Nurse*

Given up? She's at the start, not halfway through her 60  
tears.

*Tutor*

Poor fool—if I may call my mistress such a name—  
How ignorant she is of trouble more to come.

*Nurse*

What do you mean, old man? You needn't fear to speak.

*Tutor*

Nothing. I take back the words which I used just now.

*Nurse*

Don't, by your beard, hide this from me, your fellow- 65  
servant.  
If need be, I'll keep quiet about what you tell me.

*Tutor*

I heard a person saying, while I myself seemed  
Not to be paying attention, when I was at the place  
Where the old draught-players sit, by the holy fountain,  
That Creon, ruler of the land, intends to drive 70  
These children and their mother in exile from Corinth.  
But whether what he said is really true or not  
I do not know. I pray that it may not be true.

*Nurse*

And will Jason put up with it that his children  
Should suffer so, though he's no friend to their mother? 75

*Tutor*

Old ties give place to new ones. As for Jason, he  
No longer has a feeling for this house of ours.

*Nurse*

It's black indeed for us, when we add new to old  
Sorrows before even the present sky has cleared.

*Tutor*

But you be silent, and keep all this to yourself. 80  
It is not the right time to tell our mistress of it.

*Nurse*

Do you hear, children, what a father he is to you?  
I wish he were dead—but no, he is still my master.  
Yet certainly he has proved unkind to his dear ones.

*Tutor*

What's strange in that? Have you only just discovered 85  
That everyone loves himself more than his neighbor?  
Some have good reason, others get something out of it.  
So Jason neglects his children for the new bride.

*Nurse*

Go indoors, children. That will be the best thing.  
And you, keep them to themselves as much as possible. 90  
Don't bring them near their mother in her angry mood.  
For I've seen her already blazing her eyes at them  
As though she meant some mischief and I am sure that  
She'll not stop raging until she has struck at someone.  
May it be an enemy and not a friend she hurts! 95

# THE MEDEA

*(Medea is heard inside the house.)*

*Medea*

Ah, wretch! Ah, lost in my sufferings,  
I wish, I wish I might die.

*Nurse*

What did I say, dear children? Your mother  
Frets her heart and frets it to anger.  
Run away quickly into the house, 100  
And keep well out of her sight.  
Don't go anywhere near, but be careful  
Of the wildness and bitter nature  
Of that proud mind.  
Go now! Run quickly indoors. 105  
It is clear that she soon will put lightning  
In that cloud of her cries that is rising  
With a passion increasing. O, what will she do,  
Proud-hearted and not to be checked on her course,  
A soul bitten into with wrong? 110

*(The Tutor takes the children into the house.)* 4003

*Medea*

Ah, I have suffered  
What should be wept for bitterly. I hate you,  
Children of a hateful mother. I curse you  
And your father. Let the whole house crash.

*Nurse*

Ah, I pity you, you poor creature. 115  
How can your children share in their father's  
Wickedness? Why do you hate them? Oh children,  
How much I fear that something may happen!  
Great people's tempers are terrible, always  
Having their own way, seldom checked, 120  
Dangerous they shift from mood to mood.  
How much better to have been accustomed  
To live on equal terms with one's neighbors.  
I would like to be safe and grow old in a 125

Humble way. What is moderate sounds best,  
 Also in practice is best for everyone.  
 Greatness brings no profit to people.  
 God indeed, when in anger, brings  
 Greater ruin to great men's houses. 130

*(Enter, on the right, a Chorus of Corinthian women.  
 They have come to inquire about Medea  
 and to attempt to console her.)*

*Chorus*  
 I heard the voice, I heard the cry  
 Of Colchis' wretched daughter.  
 Tell me, mother, is she not yet  
 At rest? Within the double gates 135  
 Of the court I heard her cry. I am sorry  
 For the sorrow of this home. O, say, what has happened?

*Nurse*  
 There is no home. It's over and done with. 140  
 Her husband holds fast to his royal wedding,  
 While she, my mistress, cries out her eyes  
 There in her room, and takes no warmth from  
 Any word of any friend.

*Medea*  
 Oh, I wish  
 That lightning from heaven would split my head open.  
 Oh, what use have I now for life? 145  
 I would find my release in death  
 And leave hateful existence behind me.

*Chorus*  
 O God and Earth and Heaven!  
 Did you hear what a cry was that  
 Which the sad wife sings? 150  
 Poor foolish one, why should you long  
 For that appalling rest?  
 The final end of death comes fast.

# THE MEDEA

No need to pray for that.  
 Suppose your man gives honor  
 To another woman's bed.  
 It often happens. Don't be hurt.  
 God will be your friend in this.  
 You must not waste away  
 Grieving too much for him who shared your bed.

155

## Medea

Great Themis, lady Artemis, behold  
 The things I suffer, though I made him promise,  
 My hateful husband. I pray that I may see him,  
 Him and his bride and all their palace shattered  
 For the wrong they dare to do me without cause.  
 Oh, my father! Oh, my country! In what dishonor  
 I left you, killing my own brother for it.

160

165

## Nurse

Do you hear what she says, and how she cries  
 On Themis, the goddess of Promises, and on Zeus,  
 Whom we believe to be the Keeper of Oaths?  
 Of this I am sure, that no small thing  
 Will appease my mistress' anger.

170

## Chorus

Will she come into our presence?  
 Will she listen when we are speaking  
 To the words we say?  
 I wish she might relax her rage  
 And temper of her heart.  
 My willingness to help will never  
 Be wanting to my friends.  
 But go inside and bring her  
 Out of the house to us,  
 And speak kindly to her: hurry,  
 Before she wrongs her own.  
 This passion of hers moves to something great.

175

180

*Nurse*

I will, but I doubt if I'll manage  
 To win my mistress over. 185  
 But still I'll attempt it to please you.  
 Such a look she will flash on her servants  
 If any comes near with a message,  
 Like a lioness guarding her cubs.  
 It is right, I think, to consider 190  
 Both stupid and lacking in foresight  
 Those poets of old who wrote songs  
 For revels and dinners and banquets,  
 Pleasant sounds for men living at ease;  
 But none of them all has discovered 195  
 How to put to an end with their singing  
 Or musical instruments grief,  
 Bitter grief, from which death and disaster  
 Cheat the hopes of a house. Yet how good  
 If music could cure men of this! But why raise 200  
 To no purpose the voice at a banquet? For *there* is  
 Already abundance of pleasure for men  
 With a joy of its own.

*(The Nurse goes into the house.)*

*Chorus*

I heard a shriek that is laden with sorrow.  
 Shrilling out her hard grief she cries out 205  
 Upon him who betrayed both her bed and her marriage.  
 Wronged, she calls on the gods,  
 On the justice of Zeus, the oath sworn,  
 Which brought her away  
 To the opposite shore of the Greeks 210  
 Through the gloomy salt straits to the gateway  
 Of the salty unlimited sea.

*(Medea, attended by servants, comes out of the house.)*

*Medea*

Women of Corinth, I have come outside to you  
 Lest you should be indignant with me; for I know 215

# THE MEDEA

That many people are overproud, some when alone,  
 And others when in company. And those who live  
 Quietly, as I do, get a bad reputation.  
 For a just judgment is not evident in the eyes  
 When a man at first sight hates another, before 220  
 Learning his character, being in no way injured;  
 And a foreigner especially must adapt himself.  
 I'd not approve of even a fellow-countryman  
 Who by pride and want of manners offends his neighbors.  
 But on me this thing has fallen so unexpectedly, 225  
 It has broken my heart. I am finished. I let go  
 All my life's joy. My friends, I only want to die.  
 It was everything to me to think well of one man,  
 And he, my own husband, has turned out wholly vile.  
 Of all things which are living and can form a judgment 230  
 We women are the most unfortunate creatures.  
 Firstly, with an excess of wealth it is required  
 For us to buy a husband and take for our bodies  
 A master; for not to take one is even worse.  
 And now the question is serious whether we take 235  
 A good or bad one; for there is no easy escape  
 For a woman, nor can she say no to her marriage.  
 She arrives among new modes of behavior and manners,  
 And needs prophetic power, unless she has learned at  
 home,  
 How best to manage him who shares the bed with her. 240  
 And if we work out all this well and carefully,  
 And the husband lives with us and lightly bears his yoke,  
 Then life is enviable. If not, I'd rather die.  
 A man, when he's tired of the company in his home,  
 Goes out of the house and puts an end to his boredom 245  
 And turns to a friend or companion of his own age.  
 But we are forced to keep our eyes on one alone.  
 What they say of us is that we have a peaceful time  
 Living at home, while they do the fighting in war.  
 How wrong they are! I would very much rather stand 250  
 Three times in the front of battle than bear one child.  
 Yet what applies to me does not apply to you.



You have a country. Your family home is here.  
 You enjoy life and the company of your friends.  
 But I am deserted, a refugee, thought nothing of 255  
 By my husband—something he won in a foreign land.  
 I have no mother or brother, nor any relation  
 With whom I can take refuge in this sea of woe.  
 This much then is the service I would beg from you:  
 If I can find the means or devise any scheme 260  
 To pay my husband back for what he has done to me—  
 Him and his father-in-law and the girl who married  
 him—  
 Just to keep silent. For in other ways a woman  
 Is full of fear, defenseless, dreads the sight of cold  
 Steel; but, when once she is wronged in the matter of  
 love, 265  
 No other soul can hold so many thoughts of blood.

*Chorus*

This I will promise. You are in the right, Medea,  
 In paying your husband back. I am not surprised at you  
 For being sad.  
 But look! I see our King Creon  
 Approaching. He will tell us of some new plan. 270

*(Enter, from the right, Creon, with attendants.)*

*Creon*

You, with that angry look, so set against your husband,  
 Medea, I order you to leave my territories  
 An exile, and take along with you your two children,  
 And not to waste time doing it. It is my decree,  
 And I will see it done. I will not return home 275  
 Until you are cast from the boundaries of my land.

*Medea*

Oh, this is the end for me. I am utterly lost.  
 Now I am in the full force of the storm of hate  
 And have no harbor from ruin to reach easily.

Yet still, in spite of it all, I'll ask the question: 280  
What is your reason, Creon, for banishing me?

*Creon*

I am afraid of you—why should I dissemble it?—  
Afraid that you may injure my daughter mortally.  
Many things accumulate to support my feeling.  
You are a clever woman, versed in evil arts, 285  
And are angry at having lost your husband's love.  
I hear that you are threatening, so they tell me,  
To do something against my daughter and Jason  
And me, too. I shall take my precautions first.  
I tell you, I prefer to earn your hatred now 290  
Than to be soft-hearted and afterward regret it.

*Medea*

This is not the first time, Creon. Often previously  
Through being considered clever I have suffered much.  
A person of sense ought never to have his children  
Brought up to be more clever than the average. 295  
For, apart from cleverness bringing them no profit,  
It will make them objects of envy and ill-will.  
If you put new ideas before the eyes of fools  
They'll think you foolish and worthless into the bargain;  
And if you are thought superior to those who have 300  
Some reputation for learning, you will become hated.  
I have some knowledge myself of how this happens;  
For being clever, I find that some will envy me,  
Others object to me. Yet all my cleverness  
Is not so much. 305

Well, then, are you frightened, Creon,  
That I should harm you? There is no need. It is not  
My way to transgress the authority of a king.  
How have you injured me? You gave your daughter away  
To the man you wanted. Oh, certainly I hate 310  
My husband, but you, I think, have acted wisely;  
Nor do I grudge it you that your affairs go well.  
May the marriage be a lucky one! Only let me

Live in this land. For even though I have been wronged,  
I will not raise my voice, but submit to my betters. 315

*Creon*

What you say sounds gentle enough. Still in my heart  
I greatly dread that you are plotting some evil,  
And therefore I trust you even less than before.  
A sharp-tempered woman, or, for that matter, a man,  
Is easier to deal with than the clever type 320  
Who holds her tongue. No. You must go. No need for  
more  
Speeches. The thing is fixed. By no manner of means  
Shall you, an enemy of mine, stay in my country.

*Medea*

I beg you. By your knees, by your new-wedded girl.

*Creon*

Your words are wasted. You will never persuade me. 325

*Medea*

Will you drive me out, and give no heed to my prayers?

*Creon*

I will, for I love my family more than you.

*Medea*

O my country! How bitterly now I remember you!

*Creon*

I love my country too—next after my children.

*Medea*

Oh what an evil to men is passionate love! 330

*Creon*

That would depend on the luck that goes along with it.

*Medea*

O God, do not forget who is the cause of this!

THE MEDEA

*Creon*

Go. It is no use. Spare me the pain of forcing you.

*Medea*

I'm spared no pain. I lack no pain to be spared me.

*Creon*

Then you'll be removed by force by one of my men. 335

*Medea*

No, Creon, not that! But do listen, I beg you.

*Creon*

Woman, you seem to want to create a disturbance.

*Medea*

I will go into exile. *This* is not what I beg for.

*Creon*

Why then this violence and clinging to my hand?

*Medea*

Allow me to remain here just for this one day, 340  
 So I may consider where to live in my exile,  
 And look for support for my children, since their father  
 Chooses to make no kind of provision for them.  
 Have pity on them! You have children of your own.  
 It is natural for you to look kindly on them. 345  
 For myself I do not mind if I go into exile.  
 It is the children being in trouble that I mind.

*Creon*

There is nothing tyrannical about my nature,  
 And by showing mercy I have often been the loser.  
 Even now I know that I am making a mistake. 350  
 All the same you shall have your will. But this I tell you,  
 That if the light of heaven tomorrow shall see you,

You and your children in the confines of my land,  
 You die. This word I have spoken is firmly fixed.  
 But now, if you must stay, stay for this day alone. 355  
 For in it you can do none of the things I fear.

*(Exit Creon with his attendants.)*

*Chorus*

Oh, unfortunate one! Oh, cruel!  
 Where will you turn? Who will help you?  
 What house or what land to preserve you 360  
 From ill can you find?  
 Medea, a god has thrown suffering  
 Upon you in waves of despair.

*Medea*

Things have gone badly every way. No doubt of that  
 But not these things this far, and don't imagine so. 365  
 There are still trials to come for the new-wedded pair,  
 And for their relations pain that will mean something.  
 Do you think that I would ever have fawned on that man  
 Unless I had some end to gain or profit in it?  
 I would not even have spoken or touched him with my  
 hands. 370  
 But he has got to such a pitch of foolishness  
 That, though he could have made nothing of all my plans  
 By exiling me, he has given me this one day  
 To stay here, and in this I will make dead bodies  
 Of three of my enemies—father, the girl, and my  
 husband. 375  
 I have many ways of death which I might suit to them,  
 And do not know, friends, which one to take in hand;  
 Whether to set fire underneath their bridal mansion,  
 Or sharpen a sword and thrust it to the heart,  
 Stealing into the palace where the bed is made. 380  
 There is just one obstacle to this. If I am caught  
 Breaking into the house and scheming against it,  
 I shall die, and give my enemies cause for laughter.  
 It is best to go by the straight road, the one in which

I am most skilled, and make away with them by poison. 385  
So be it then.

And now suppose them dead. What town will receive  
me?

What friend will offer me a refuge in his land,  
Or the guaranty of his house and save my own life?  
There is none. So I must wait a little time yet,  
And if some sure defense should then appear for me, 390  
In craft and silence I will set about this murder.

But if my fate should drive me on without help,  
Even though death is certain, I will take the sword  
Myself and kill, and steadfastly advance to crime.

It shall not be—I swear it by her, my mistress, 395  
Whom most I honor and have chosen as partner,  
Hecate, who dwells in the recesses of my hearth—  
That any man shall be glad to have injured me.

Bitter I will make their marriage for them and mournful,  
Bitter the alliance and the driving me out of the land. 400

Ah, come, Medea, in your plotting and scheming  
Leave nothing untried of all those things which you  
know.

Go forward to the dreadful act. The test has come  
For resolution. You see how you are treated. Never  
Shall you be mocked by Jason's Corinthian wedding, 405  
Whose father was noble, whose grandfather Helius.  
You have the skill. What is more, you were born a  
woman,

And women, though most helpless in doing good deeds,  
Are of every evil the cleverest of contrivers.

### *Chorus*

Flow backward to your sources, sacred rivers, 410  
And let the world's great order be reversed.

It is the thoughts of *men* that are deceitful,  
*Their* pledges that are loose. 415

Story shall now turn my condition to a fair one,  
Women are paid their due.

No more shall evil-sounding fame be theirs. 420

# EURIPIDES

Cease now, you muses of the ancient singers,  
 To tell the tale of my unfaithfulness;  
 For not on us did Phoebus, lord of music,  
 Bestow the lyre's divine 425  
 Power, for otherwise I should have sung an answer  
 To the other sex. Long time  
 Has much to tell of us, and much of them. 430

You sailed away from your father's home,  
 With a heart on fire you passed  
 The double rocks of the sea.  
 And now in a foreign country 435  
 You have lost your rest in a widowed bed,  
 And are driven forth, a refugee  
 In dishonor from the land.

Good faith has gone, and no more remains  
 In great Greece a sense of shame. 440  
 It has flown away to the sky.  
 No father's house for a haven  
 Is at hand for you now, and another queen  
 Of your bed has dispossessed you and  
 Is mistress of your home. 445

*(Enter Jason, with attendants.)*

*Jason*

This is not the first occasion that I have noticed  
 How hopeless it is to deal with a stubborn temper.  
 For, with reasonable submission to our ruler's will,  
 You might have lived in this land and kept your home.  
 As it is you are going to be exiled for your loose speaking. 450  
 Not that I mind myself. You are free to continue  
 Telling everyone that Jason is a worthless man.  
 But as to your talk about the king, consider  
 Yourself most lucky that exile is your punishment.  
 I, for my part, have always tried to calm down 455  
 The anger of the king, and wished you to remain.

But you will not give up your folly, continually  
 Speaking ill of him, and so you are going to be banished.  
 All the same, and in spite of your conduct, I'll not desert  
 My friends, but have come to make some provision for  
 you, 460  
 So that you and the children may not be penniless  
 Or in need of anything in exile. Certainly  
 Exile brings many troubles with it. And even  
 If you hate me, I cannot think badly of you.

*Medea*

O coward in every way—that is what I call you, 465  
 With bitterest reproach for your lack of manliness,  
 You have come, you, my worst enemy, have come to me!  
 It is not an example of overconfidence  
 Or of boldness thus to look your friends in the face, 470  
 Friends you have injured—no, it is the worst of all  
 Human diseases, shamelessness. But you did well  
 To come, for I can speak ill of you and lighten  
 My heart, and you will suffer while you are listening.  
 And first I will begin from what happened first. 475  
 I saved your life, and every Greek knows I saved it,  
 Who was a shipmate of yours aboard the Argo,  
 When you were sent to control the bulls that breathed  
 fire  
 And yoke them, and when you would sow that deadly  
 field.  
 Also that snake, who encircled with his many folds 480  
 The Golden Fleece and guarded it and never slept,  
 I killed, and so gave you the safety of the light.  
 And I myself betrayed my father and my home,  
 And came with you to Pelias' land of Iolcus.  
 And then, showing more willingness to help than wisdom, 485  
 I killed him, Pelias, with a most dreadful death  
 At his own daughters' hands, and took away your fear.  
 This is how I behaved to you, you wretched man,  
 And you forsook me, took another bride to bed,  
 Though you had children; for, if that had not been, 490



- { You would have had an excuse for another wedding.  
 Faith in your word has gone. Indeed, I cannot tell  
 Whether you think the gods whose names you swore by  
 then  
 Have ceased to rule and that new standards are set up,  
 Since you must know you have broken your word to me. 495  
 O my right hand, and the knees which you often clasped  
 In supplication, how senselessly I am treated  
 By this bad man, and how my hopes have missed their  
 mark!  
 Come, I will share my thoughts as though you were a  
 friend—  
 You! Can I think that you would ever treat me well? 500  
 But I will do it, and these questions will make you  
 Appear the baser. Where am I to go? To my father's?  
 Him I betrayed and his land when I came with you.  
 To Pelias' wretched daughters? What a fine welcome  
 They would prepare for me who murdered their father! 505  
 For this is my position—hated by my friends  
 At home, I have, in kindness to you, made enemies  
 Of others whom there was no need to have injured.)  
 And how happy among Greek women you have made me  
 On your side for all this! A distinguished husband 510  
 I have—for breaking promises. When in misery  
 I am cast out of the land and go into exile,  
 Quite without friends and all alone with my children,  
 That will be a fine shame for the new-wedded groom,  
 For his children to wander as beggars and she who saved  
 him. 515  
 O God, you have given to mortals a sure method  
 Of telling the gold that is pure from the counterfeit;  
 Why is there no mark engraved upon men's bodies,  
 By which we could know the true ones from the false  
 ones?

*Chorus*

- It is a strange form of anger, difficult to cure,  
 When two friends turn upon each other in hatred. ) 520

Jason

As for me, it seems I must be no bad speaker.  
 But, like a man who has a good grip of the tiller,  
 Reef up his sail, and so run away from under  
 This mouthing tempest, woman, of your bitter tongue. 525  
 Since you insist on building up your kindness to me,  
 My view is that Cypris was alone responsible  
 Of men and gods for the preserving of my life.  
 You are clever enough—but really I need not enter  
 Into the story of how it was love's inescapable 530  
 Power that compelled you to keep my person safe.  
 On this I will not go into too much detail.  
 In so far as you helped me, you did well enough.  
 But on this question of saving me, I can prove  
 You have certainly got from me more than you gave. 535  
 Firstly, instead of living among barbarians,  
 You inhabit a Greek land and understand our ways,  
 How to live by law instead of the sweet will of force.  
 And all the Greeks considered you a clever woman.  
 You were honored for it; while, if you were living at 540  
 The ends of the earth, nobody would have heard of you.  
 For my part, rather than stores of gold in my house  
 Or power to sing even sweeter songs than Orpheus,  
 I'd choose the fate that made me a distinguished man.  
 There is my reply to your story of my labors. 545  
 Remember it was you who started the argument.  
 Next for your attack on my wedding with the princess:  
 Here I will prove that, first, it was a clever move,  
 Secondly, a wise one, and, finally, that I made it  
 In your best interests and the children's. Please keep  
 calm. 550  
 When I arrived here from the land of Iolcus,  
 Involved, as I was, in every kind of difficulty,  
 What luckier chance could I have come across than this,  
 An exile to marry the daughter of the king?  
 It was not—the point that seems to upset you—that I 555  
 Grew tired of your bed and felt the need of a new bride;  
 Nor with any wish to outdo your number of children.

We have enough already. I am quite content.  
 But—this was the main reason—that we might live well,  
 And not be short of anything. I know that all 560  
 A man's friends leave him stone-cold if he becomes poor.  
 Also that I might bring my children up worthily  
 Of my position, and, by producing more of them  
 To be brothers of yours, we would draw the families  
 Together and all be happy. You need no children. 565  
 And it pays me to do good to those I have now  
 By having others. Do you think this a bad plan?  
 You wouldn't if the love question hadn't upset you.  
 But you women have got into such a state of mind  
 That, if your life at night is good, you think you have 570  
 Everything; but, if in that quarter things go wrong,  
 You will consider your best and truest interests  
 Most hateful. (It would have been better far for men  
 To have got their children in some other way, and women  
 Not to have existed. Then life would have been good. 575

*Chorus*

Jason, though you have made this speech of yours look  
 well,  
 Still I think, even though others do not agree,  
 You have betrayed your wife and are acting badly.

*Medea*

Surely in many ways I hold different views  
 From others, for I think that the plausible speaker 580  
 Who is a villain deserves the greatest punishment.  
 Confident in his tongue's power to adorn evil,  
 He stops at nothing. Yet he is not really wise.  
 As in your case. There is no need to put on the airs  
 Of a clever speaker, for one word will lay you flat. 585  
 If you were not a coward, you would not have married  
 Behind my back, but discussed it with me first.

*Jason*

And you, no doubt, would have furthered the proposal,

THE MEDEA

If I had told you of it, you who even now  
Are incapable of controlling your bitter temper. 590

*Medea*

It was not that. No, you thought it was not respectable  
As you got on in years to have a foreign wife.

*Jason*

Make sure of this: it was not because of a woman  
I made the royal alliance in which I now live,  
But, as I said before, I wished to preserve you 595  
And breed a royal progeny to be brothers  
To the children I have now, a sure defense to us.

*Medea*

Let me have no happy fortune that brings pain with it,  
Or prosperity which is upsetting to the mind!

*Jason*

Change your ideas of what you want, and show more  
sense. 600  
Do not consider painful what is good for you,  
Nor, when you are lucky, think yourself unfortunate.

*Medea*

You can insult me. You have somewhere to turn to.  
But I shall go from this land into exile, friendless.

*Jason*

It was what you chose yourself. Don't blame others for it. 605

*Medea*

And how did I choose it? Did I betray my husband?

*Jason*

You called down wicked curses on the king's family.

*Medea*

A curse, that is what I am become to your house too.

*Jason*

I do not propose to go into all the rest of it;  
 But, if you wish for the children or for yourself 610  
 In exile to have some of my money to help you,  
 Say so, for I am prepared to give with open hand,  
 Or to provide you with introductions to my friends  
 Who will treat you well. You are a fool if you do not  
 Accept this. Cease your anger and you will profit. 615

*Medea*

I shall never accept the favors of friends of yours,  
 Nor take a thing from you, so you need not offer it.  
 There is no benefit in the gifts of a bad man.

*Jason*

Then, in any case, I call the gods to witness that  
 I wish to help you and the children in every way, 520  
 But you refuse what is good for you. Obstinate  
 You push away your friends. You are sure to suffer for it.

*Medea*

Go! No doubt you hanker for your virginal bride,  
 And are guilty of lingering too long out of her house.  
 Enjoy your wedding. But perhaps—with the help of  
 God— 625  
 You will make the kind of marriage that you will regret.

*(Jason goes out with his attendants.)*

*Chorus*

When love is in excess  
 It brings a man no honor  
 Nor any worthiness.  
 But if in moderation Cypris comes, 630  
 There is no other power at all so gracious.  
 O goddess, never on me let loose the unerring  
 Shaft of your bow in the poison of desire.

Let my heart be wise. 635  
 It is the gods' best gift.

# THE MEDEA

On me let mighty Cypris  
 Inflict no wordy wars or restless anger  
 To urge my passion to a different love.  
 But with discernment may she guide women's weddings, 640  
 Honoring most what is peaceful in the bed.

O country and home,  
 Never, never may I be without you,  
 Living the hopeless life, 645  
 Hard to pass through and painful,  
 Most pitiable of all.  
 Let death first lay me low and death  
 Free me from this daylight.  
 There is no sorrow above 650  
 The loss of a native land.

I have seen it myself,  
 Do not tell of a second-hand story  
 Neither city nor friend 655  
 Pitied you when you suffered  
 The worst of sufferings.  
 O let him die ungraced whose heart  
 Will not reward his friends, 660  
 Who cannot open an honest mind  
 No friend will he be of mine.

*(Enter Aegeus, king of Athens, an old friend of Medea.)*

*Aegeus*

Medea, greeting! This is the best introduction  
 Of which men know for conversation between friends.

*Medea*

Greeting to you too, Aegeus, son of King Pandion. 665  
 Where have you come from to visit this country's soil?

*Aegeus*

I have just left the ancient oracle of Phoebus.

*Medea*

And why did you go to earth's prophetic center?

*Aegeus*

I went to inquire how children might be born to me.

*Medea*

Is it so? Your life still up to this point is childless? 670

*Aegeus*

Yes. By the fate of some power we have no children.

*Medea*

Have you a wife, or is there none to share your bed?

*Aegeus*

There is. Yes, I am joined to my wife in marriage.

*Medea*

And what did Phoebus say to you about children?

*Aegeus*

Words too wise for a mere man to guess their meaning. 675

*Medea*

It is proper for me to be told the god's reply?

*Aegeus*

It is. For sure what is needed is cleverness.

*Medea*

Then what was his message? Tell me, if I may hear.

*Aegeus*

I am not to loosen the hanging foot of the wine-skin . . .

*Medea*

Until you have done something, or reached some country? 680

THE MEDEA

*Aegeus*

Until I return again to my hearth and house.

*Medea*

And for what purpose have you journeyed to this land?

*Aegeus*

There is a man called Pittheus, king of Troezen.

*Medea*

A son of Pelops, they say, a most righteous man.

*Aegeus*

With him I wish to discuss the reply of the god.

685

*Medea*

Yes. He is wise and experienced in such matters.

*Aegeus*

And to me also the dearest of all my spear-friends.

*Medea*

Well, I hope you have good luck, and achieve your will.

*Aegeus*

But why this downcast eye of yours, and this pale cheek?

*Medea*

O Aegeus, my husband has been the worst of all to me.

690

*Aegeus*

What do you mean? Say clearly what has caused this  
grief.

*Medea*

Jason wrongs me, though I have never injured him.

*Aegeus*

What has he done? Tell me about it in clearer words.



*Medea*

He has taken a wife to his house, supplanting me.

*Aegeus*

Surely he would not dare to do a thing like that.

695

*Medea*

Be sure he has. Once dear, I now am slighted by him.

*Aegeus*

Did he fall in love? Or is he tired of your love?

*Medea*

He was greatly in love, this traitor to his friends.

*Aegeus*

Then let him go, if, as you say, he is so bad.

*Medea*

A passionate love—for an alliance with the king.

700

*Aegeus*

And who gave him his wife? Tell me the rest of it.

*Medea*

It was Creon, he who rules this land of Corinth.

*Aegeus*

Indeed, Medea, your grief was understandable.

*Medea*

I am ruined. And there is more to come: I am banished.

*Aegeus*

Banished? By whom? Here you tell me of a new wrong.

705

*Medea*

Creon drives me an exile from the land of Corinth.

*Aegeus*

Does Jason consent? I cannot approve of this.

*Medea*

He pretends not to, but he will put up with it.  
 Ah, *Aegeus*, I beg and beseech you, by your beard  
 And by your knees I am making myself your suppliant, 710  
 Have pity on me, have pity on your poor friend,  
 And do not let me go into exile desolate,  
 But receive me in your land and at your very hearth.  
 So may your love, with God's help, lead to the bearing  
 Of children, and so may you yourself die happy. 715  
 You do not know what a chance you have come on here.  
 I will end your childlessness, and I will make you able  
 To beget children. The drugs I know can do this.

*Aegeus*

For many reasons, woman, I am anxious to do  
 This favor for you. First, for the sake of the gods, 720  
 And then for the birth of children which you promise,  
 For in that respect I am entirely at my wits' end.  
 But this is my position: if you reach my land,  
 I, being in my rights, will try to befriend you.  
 But this much I must warn you of beforehand: 725  
 I shall not agree to take you out of this country;  
 But if you by yourself can reach my house, then you  
 Shall stay there safely. To none will I give you up  
 But from this land you must make your escape yourself,  
 For I do not wish to incur blame from my friends. 730

*Medea*

It shall be so. But, if I might have a pledge from you  
 For this, then I would have from you all I desire.

*Aegeus*

Do you not trust me? What is it rankles with you?

*Medea*

I trust you, yes. But the house of Pelias hates me,

And so does Creon. If you are bound by this oath, 735  
 When they try to drag me from your land, you will not  
 Abandon me; but if our pact is only words,  
 With no oath to the gods, you will be lightly armed,  
 Unable to resist their summons. I am weak,  
 While they have wealth to help them and a royal house. 740

*Aegeus*

You show much foresight for such negotiations.  
 Well, if you will have it so, I will not refuse.  
 For, both on my side this will be the safest way  
 To have some excuse to put forward to your enemies,  
 And for you it is more certain. You may name the gods. 745

*Medea*

Swear by the plain of Earth, and Helius, father  
 Of my father, and name together all the gods. . .

*Aegeus*

That I will act or not act in what way? Speak.

*Medea*

That you yourself will never cast me from your land,  
 Nor, if any of my enemies should demand me, 750  
 Will you, in your life, willingly hand me over.

*Aegeus*

I swear by the Earth, by the holy light of Helius,  
 By all the gods, I will abide by this you say.

*Medea*

Enough. And, if you fail, what shall happen to you?

*Aegeus*

What comes to those who have no regard for heaven. 755

*Medea*

Go on your way. Farewell. For I am satisfied.

# THE MEDEA

And I will reach your city as soon as I can,  
Having done the deed I have to do and gained my end.

(*Aegeus goes out.*)

## Chorus

May Hermes, god of travelers,  
Escort you, Aegeus, to your home! 760  
And may you have the things you wish  
So eagerly; for you  
Appear to me to be a generous man.

## Medea

God, and God's daughter, justice, and light of Helios!  
Now, friends, has come the time of my triumph over 765  
My enemies, and now my foot is on the road.  
Now I am confident they will pay the penalty.  
For this man, Aegeus, has been like a harbor to me  
In all my plans just where I was most distressed.  
To him I can fasten the cable of my safety 770  
When I have reached the town and fortress of Pallas.  
And now I shall tell to you the whole of my plan.  
Listen to these words that are not spoken idly.  
I shall send one of my servants to find Jason  
And request him to come once more into my sight. 775  
And when he comes, the words I'll say will be soft ones.  
I'll say that I agree with him, that I approve  
The royal wedding he has made, betraying me.  
I'll say it was profitable, an excellent idea.  
But I shall beg that my children may remain here: 780  
Not that I would leave in a country that hates me  
Children of mine to feel their enemies' insults,  
But that by a trick I may kill the king's daughter.  
For I will send the children with gifts in their hands  
To carry to the bride, so as not to be banished— 785  
A finely woven dress and a golden diadem.  
And if she takes them and wears them upon her skin  
She and all who touch the girl will die in agony;  
Such poison will I lay upon the gifts I send.

But there, however, I must leave that account paid. 790  
 I weep to think of what a deed I have to do  
 Next after that; for I shall kill my own children.  
 My children, there is none who can give them safety.  
 And when I have ruined the whole of Jason's house,  
 I shall leave the land and flee from the murder of my 795  
 Dear children, and I shall have done a dreadful deed.  
 For it is not bearable to be mocked by enemies.  
 So it must happen. What profit have I in life?  
 I have no land, no home, no refuge from my pain.  
 My mistake was made the time I left behind me 800  
 My father's house, and trusted the words of a Greek,  
 Who, with heaven's help, will pay me the price for that.  
 For those children he had from me he will never  
 See alive again, nor will he on his new bride  
 Beget another child, for she is to be forced 805  
 To die a most terrible death by these my poisons.  
 Let no one think me a weak one, feeble-spirited,  
 A stay-at-home, but rather just the opposite,  
 One who can hurt my enemies and help my friends;  
 For the lives of such persons are most remembered. 810

*Chorus*

Since you have shared the knowledge of your plan  
 with us,  
 I both wish to help you and support the normal  
 Ways of mankind, and tell you not to do this thing.

*Medea*

I can do no other thing. It is understandable  
 For you to speak thus. You have not suffered as I have. 815

*Chorus*

But can you have the heart to kill your flesh and blood?

*Medea*

Yes, for this is the best way to wound my husband.

*Chorus*

And you, too. Of women you will be most unhappy.

*Medea*

So it must be. No compromise is possible.

*(She turns to the Nurse.)*

Go, you, at once, and tell Jason to come to me. 820  
 You I employ on all affairs of greatest trust.  
 Say nothing of these decisions which I have made,  
 If you love your mistress, if you were born a woman.

*Chorus*

From of old the children of Erechtheus are  
 Splendid, the sons of blessed gods. They dwell 825  
 In Athens' holy and unconquered land,  
 Where famous Wisdom feeds them and they pass gaily  
 Always through that most brilliant air where once, they  
 say, 830  
 That golden Harmony gave birth to the nine  
 Pure Muses of Pieria.

And beside the sweet flow of Cephissus' stream, 835  
 Where Cypris sailed, they say, to draw the water,  
 And mild soft breezes breathed along her path,  
 And on her hair were flung the sweet-smelling garlands 840  
 Of flowers of roses by the Lovers, the companions  
 Of Wisdom, her escort, the helpers of men  
 In every kind of excellence. 845

How then can these holy rivers  
 Or this holy land love you,  
 Or the city find you a home,  
 You, who will kill your children,  
 You, not pure with the rest? 850  
 O think of the blow at your children  
 And think of the blood that you shed.

O, over and over I beg you,  
 By your knees I beg you do not  
 Be the murderess of your babes! 855

O where will you find the courage  
 Or the skill of hand and heart,  
 When you set yourself to attempt  
 A deed so dreadful to do?  
 How, when you look upon them, 860  
 Can you tearlessly hold the decision  
 For murder? You will not be able,  
 When your children fall down and implore you,  
 You will not be able to dip  
 Steadfast your hand in their blood. 865

*(Enter Jason with attendants.)*

*Jason*

I have come at your request. Indeed, although you are  
 Bitter against me, this you shall have: I will listen  
 To what new thing you want, woman, to get from me.

*Medea*

Jason, I beg you to be forgiving toward me  
 For what I said. It is natural for you to bear with 870  
 My temper, since we have had much love together.  
 I have talked with myself about this and I have  
 Reproached myself. "Fool" I said, "why am I so mad?  
 Why am I set against those who have planned wisely?  
 Why make myself an enemy of the authorities 875  
 And of my husband, who does the best thing for me  
 By marrying royalty and having children who  
 Will be as brothers to my own? What is wrong with me?  
 Let me give up anger, for the gods are kind to me.  
 Have I not children, and do I not know that we 880  
 In exile from our country must be short of friends?"  
 When I considered this I saw that I had shown  
 Great lack of sense, and that my anger was foolish.  
 Now I agree with you. I think that you are wise

# THE MEDEA

In having this other wife as well as me, and I  
 Was mad. I should have helped you in these plan:  
     yours,  
 Have joined in the wedding, stood by the marriage bed,  
 Have taken pleasure in attendance on your bride.  
 But we women are what we are—perhaps a little  
 Worthless; and you men must not be like us in this,      890  
 Nor be foolish in return when we are foolish.  
 Now, I give in, and admit that then I was wrong.  
 I have come to a better understanding now.

*(She turns toward the house.)*

Children, come here, my children, come outdoors to us!  
 Welcome your father with me, and say goodbye to him,      895  
 And with your mother, who just now was his enemy,  
 Join again in making friends with him who loves us.

*(Enter the children, attended by the Tutor.)*

We have made peace, and all our anger is over.  
 Take hold of his right hand—O God, I am thinking  
 Of something which may happen in the secret future.      900  
 O children, will you just so, after a long life,  
 Hold out your loving arms at the grave? O children,  
 How ready to cry I am, how full of foreboding!  
 I am ending at last this quarrel with your father,  
 And, look my soft eyes have suddenly filled with tears.      905

*Chorus*

And the pale tears have started also in my eyes.  
 O may the trouble not grow worse than now it is!

*Jason*

I approve of what you say. And I cannot blame you  
 Even for what you said before. It is natural  
 For a woman to be wild with her husband when he      910  
 Goes in for secret love. But now your mind has turned



To better reasoning. In the end you have come to  
 The right decision, like the clever woman you are.  
 And of you, children, your father is taking care.  
 He has made, with God's help, ample provision for you. 915  
 For I think that a time will come when you will be  
 The leading people in Corinth with your brothers.  
 You must grow up. As to the future, your father  
 And those of the gods who love him will deal with that.  
 I want to see you, when you have become young men, 920  
 Healthy and strong, better men than my enemies.  
 Medea, why are your eyes all wet with pale tears?  
 Why is your cheek so white and turned away from me?  
 Are not these words of mine pleasing for you to hear?

*Medea*

It is nothing. I was thinking about these children. 925

*Jason*

You must be cheerful. I shall look after them well.

*Medea*

I will be. It is not that I distrust your words,  
 But a woman is a frail thing, prone to crying.

*Jason*

But why then should you grieve so much for these  
 children?

*Medea*

I am their mother. When you prayed that they might live 930  
 I felt unhappy to think that these things will be.  
 But come, I have said something of the things I meant  
 To say to you, and now I will tell you the rest.  
 Since it is the king's will to banish me from here—  
 And for me, too, I know that this is the best thing, 935  
 Not to be in your way by living here or in  
 The king's way, since they think me ill-disposed to  
 them—

THE MEDEA

I then am going into exile from this land;  
But do you, so that you may have the care of them,  
Beg Creon that the children may not be banished. 940

*Jason*

I doubt if I'll succeed, but still I'll attempt it.

*Medea*

Then you must tell your wife to beg from her father  
That the children may be reprieved from banishment.

*Jason*

I will, and with her I shall certainly succeed.

*Medea*

If she is like the rest of us women, you will. 945  
And I, too, will take a hand with you in this business,  
For I will send her some gifts which are far fairer,  
I am sure of it, than those which now are in fashion,  
A finely woven dress and a golden diadem,  
And the children shall present them. Quick, let one of  
you 950  
Servants bring here to me that beautiful dress.

*(One of her attendants goes into the house.)*

She will be happy not in one way, but in a hundred,  
Having so fine a man as you to share her bed,  
And with this beautiful dress which Helius of old,  
My father's father, bestowed on his descendants. 955

*(Enter attendant carrying the poisoned dress  
and diadem.)*

There, children, take these wedding presents in your  
hands.

Take them to the royal princess, the happy bride,  
And give them to her. She will not think little of them.

*Jason*

No, don't be foolish, and empty your hands of these.  
 Do you think the palace is short of dresses to wear? 960  
 Do you think there is no gold there? Keep them, don't  
     give them  
 Away. If my wife considers me of any value,  
 She will think more of me than money, I am sure of it.

*Medea*

No, let me have my way. They say the gods themselves  
 Are moved by gifts, and gold does more with men than  
     words. 965  
 Hers is the luck, her fortune that which God blesses;  
 She is young and a princess; but for my children's reprieve  
 I would give my very life, and not gold only.  
 Go children, go together to that rich palace,  
 Be suppliants to the new wife of your father, 970  
 My lady, beg her not to let you be banished.  
 And give her the dress—for this is of great importance,  
 That she should take the gift into her hand from yours.  
 Go, quick as you can. And bring your mother good news  
 By your success of those things which she longs to gain. 975

*(Jason goes out with his attendants, followed by the  
 Tutor and the children carrying the poisoned gifts.)*

*Chorus*

Now there is no hope left for the children's lives.  
 Now there is none. They are walking already to murder.  
 The bride, poor bride, will accept the curse of the gold,  
 Will accept the bright diadem.  
 Around her yellow hair she will set that dress 980  
 Of death with her own hands.

The grace and the perfume and glow of the golden robe  
 Will charm her to put them upon her and wear the  
     wreath,  
 And now her wedding will be with the dead below, 985

# THE MEDEA

Into such a trap she will fall,  
 Poor thing, into such a fate of death and never  
 Escape from under that curse.

You, too, O wretched bridegroom, making your match  
 with kings, 990

You do not see that you bring  
 Destruction on your children and on her,  
 Your wife, a fearful death.  
 Poor soul, what a fall is yours! 995

In your grief, too, I weep, mother of little children,  
 You who will murder your own,  
 In vengeance for the loss of married love  
 Which Jason has betrayed 1000  
 As he lives with another wife.

*(Enter the Tutor with the children.)*

*Tutor*

Mistress, I tell you that these children are reprieved,  
 And the royal bride has been pleased to take in her hands  
 Your gifts. In that quarter the children are secure.  
 But come,  
 Why do you stand confused when you are fortunate? 1005  
 Why have you turned round with your cheek away from  
 me?  
 Are not these words of mine pleasing for you to hear?

*Medea*

Oh! I am lost!

*Tutor*

That word is not in harmony with my tidings.

*Medea*

I am lost, I am lost!

*Tutor*

Am I in ignorance telling you  
 Of some disaster, and not the good news I thought? 1010

*Medea*

You have told what you have told. I do not blame you.

*Tutor*

Why then this downcast eye, and this weeping of tears?

*Medea*

Oh, I am forced to weep, old man. The gods and I,  
I in a kind of madness, have contrived all this.

*Tutor*

Courage! You, too, will be brought home by your  
children.

1015

*Medea*

Ah, before that happens I shall bring others home.

*Tutor*

Others before you have been parted from their children.  
Mortals must bear in resignation their ill luck.

*Medea*

That is what I shall do. But go inside the house,  
And do for the children your usual daily work.

1020

*(The Tutor goes into the house. Medea turns  
to her children.)*

O children, O my children, you have a city,  
You have a home, and you can leave me behind you,  
And without your mother you may live there forever.  
But I am going in exile to another land  
Before I have seen you happy and taken pleasure in you, 1025  
Before I have dressed your brides and made your marriage  
beds  
And held up the torch at the ceremony of wedding.  
Oh, what a wretch I am in this my self-willed thought!  
What was the purpose, children, for which I reared you?

# THE MEDEA

For all my travail and wearing myself away? 1030  
 They were sterile, those pains I had in the bearing of you.  
 Oh surely once the hopes in you I had, poor me,  
 Were high ones: you would look after me in old age,  
 And when I died would deck me well with your own  
 hands;  
 A thing which all would have done. Oh but now it is  
 gone, 1035  
 That lovely thought. For, once I am left without you,  
 Sad will be the life I'll lead and sorrowful for me.  
 And you will never see your mother again with  
 Your dear eyes, gone to another mode of living.  
 Why, children, do you look upon me with your eyes? 1040  
 Why do you smile so sweetly that last smile of all?  
 Oh, Oh, what can I do? My spirit has gone from me,  
 Friends, when I saw that bright look in the children's  
 eyes.  
 I cannot bear to do it. I renounce my plans  
 I had before. I'll take my children away from 1045  
 This land. Why should I hurt their father with the pain  
 They feel, and suffer twice as much of pain myself?  
 No, no, I will not do it. I renounce my plans.  
 Ah, what is wrong with me? Do I want to let go  
 My enemies unhurt and be laughed at for it? 1050  
 I must face this thing. Oh, but what a weak woman  
 Even to admit to my mind these soft arguments.  
 Children, go into the house. And he whom law forbids  
 To stand in attendance at my sacrifices,  
 Let him see to it. I shall not mar my handiwork. 1055  
 Oh! Oh!  
 Do not, O my heart, you must not do these things!  
 Poor heart, let them go, have pity upon the children.  
 If they live with you in Athens they will cheer you.  
 No! By Hell's avenging furies it shall not be—  
 This shall never be, that I should suffer my children 1060  
 To be the prey of my enemies' insolence.  
 Every way is it fixed. The bride will not escape.  
 No, the diadem is now upon her head, and she, 1065

The royal princess, is dying in the dress, I know it.  
 But—for it is the most dreadful of roads for me  
 To tread, and them I shall send on a more dreadful still—  
 I wish to speak to the children.

*(She calls the children to her.)*

Come, children, give  
 Me your hands, give your mother your hands to kiss them. 1070  
 Oh the dear hands, and O how dear are these lips to me,  
 And the generous eyes and the bearing of my children!  
 I wish you happiness, but not here in this world.  
 What is here your father took. Oh how good to hold you!  
 How delicate the skin, how sweet the breath of children! 1075  
 Go, go! I am no longer able, no longer  
 To look upon you. I am overcome by sorrow.

*(The children go into the house.)*

I know indeed what evil I intend to do,  
 But stronger than all my afterthoughts is my fury,  
 Fury that brings upon mortals the greatest evils. 1080

*(She goes out to the right, toward the royal palace.)*

*Chorus*

Often before  
 I have gone through more subtle reasons,  
 And have come upon questions greater  
 Than a woman should strive to search out.  
 But we too have a goddess to help us 1085  
 And accompany us into wisdom.  
 Not all of us. Still you will find  
 Among many women a few,  
 And our sex is not without learning.  
 This I say, that those who have never 1090  
 Had children, who know nothing of it,  
 In happiness have the advantage  
 Over those who are parents.

# THE MEDEA

The childless, who never discover  
 Whether children turn out as a good thing 1095  
 Or as something to cause pain, are spared  
 Many troubles in lacking this knowledge.  
 And those who have in their homes  
 The sweet presence of children, I see that their lives  
 Are all wasted away by their worries. 1100  
 First they must think how to bring them up well and  
 How to leave them something to live on.  
 And then after this whether all their toil  
 Is for those who will turn out good or bad,  
 Is still an unanswered question.  
 And of one more trouble, the last of all, 1105  
 That is common to mortals I tell.  
 For suppose you have found them enough for their living.  
 Suppose that the children have grown into youth  
 And have turned out good, still, if God so wills it,  
 Death will away with your children's bodies,  
 And carry them off into Hades. 1110  
 What is our profit, then, that for the sake of  
 Children the gods should pile upon mortals  
 After all else  
 This most terrible grief of all? 1115

*(Enter Medea, from the spectators' right.)*

*Medea*

Friends, I can tell you that for long I have waited  
 For the event. I stare toward the place from where  
 The news will come. And now, see one of Jason's servants  
 Is on his way here, and that labored breath of his  
 Shows he has tidings for us, and evil tidings. 1120

*(Enter, also from the right, the Messenger.)*

*Messenger*

Medea, you who have done such a dreadful thing,  
 So outrageous, run for your life, take what you can,  
 A ship to bear you hence or chariot on land.



*Medea*

And what is the reason deserves such flight as this?

*Messenger*

She is dead, only just now, the royal princess, 1125  
And Creon dead, too, her father, by your poisons.

*Medea*

The finest words you have spoken. Now and hereafter  
I shall count you among my benefactors and friends.

*Messenger*

What! Are you right in the mind? Are you not mad,  
Woman? The house of the king is outraged by you. 1130  
Do you enjoy it? Not afraid of such doings?

*Medea*

To what you say I on my side have something too  
To say in answer. Do not be in a hurry, friend,  
But speak. How did they die? You will delight me twice  
As much again if you say they died in agony. 1135

*Messenger*

When those two children, born of you, had entered in,  
Their father with them, and passed into the bride's house,  
We were pleased, we slaves who were distressed by your  
wrongs.  
All through the house we were talking of but one thing,  
How you and your husband had made up your quarrel. 1140  
Some kissed the children's hands and some their yellow  
hair,  
And I myself was so full of my joy that I  
Followed the children into the women's quarters.  
Our mistress, whom we honor now instead of you,  
Before she noticed that your two children were there, 1145  
Was keeping her eye fixed eagerly on Jason.  
Afterwards, however, she covered up her eyes,

Her cheek paled, and she turned herself away from him,  
 So disgusted was she at the children's coming there.  
 But your husband tried to end the girl's bad temper, 1150  
 And said "You must not look unkindly on your friends.  
 Cease to be angry. Turn your head to me again.  
 Have as your friends the same ones as your husband has.  
 And take these gifts, and beg your father to relieve  
 These children from their exile. Do it for my sake." 1155  
 She, when she saw the dress, could not restrain herself.  
 She agreed with all her husband said, and before  
 He and the children had gone far from the palace,  
 She took the gorgeous robe and dressed herself in it,  
 And put the golden crown around her curly locks, 1160  
 And arranged the set of the hair in a shining mirror,  
 And smiled at the lifeless image of herself in it.  
 Then she rose from her chair and walked about the room,  
 With her gleaming feet stepping most soft and delicate,  
 All overjoyed with the present. Often and often 1165  
 She would stretch her foot out straight and look along it.  
 But after that it was a fearful thing to see.  
 The color of her face changed, and she staggered back,  
 She ran, and her legs trembled, and she only just  
 Managed to reach a chair without falling flat down. 1170  
 An aged woman servant who, I take it, thought  
 This was some seizure of Pan or another god,  
 Cried out "God bless us," but that was before she saw  
 The white foam breaking through her lips and her rolling  
 The pupils of her eyes and her face all bloodless. 1175  
 Then she raised a different cry from that "God bless us,"  
 A huge shriek, and the women ran, one to the king,  
 One to the newly wedded husband to tell him  
 What had happened to his bride; and with frequent  
 sound  
 The whole of the palace rang as they went running. 1180  
 One walking quickly round the course of a race-track  
 Would now have turned the bend and be close to the  
 goal,  
 When she, poor girl, opened her shut and speechless eye,

And with a terrible groan she came to herself.  
 For a twofold pain was moving up against her. 1185  
 The wreath of gold that was resting around her head  
 Let forth a fearful stream of all-devouring fire,  
 And the finely woven dress your children gave to her,  
 Was fastening on the unhappy girl's fine flesh.  
 She leapt up from the chair, and all on fire she ran, 1190  
 Shaking her hair now this way and now that, trying  
 To hurl the diadem away; but fixedly  
 The gold preserved its grip, and, when she shook her hair,  
 Then more and twice as fiercely the fire blazed out.  
 Till, beaten by her fate, she fell down to the ground, 1195  
 Hard to be recognized except by a parent.  
 Neither the setting of her eyes was plain to see,  
 Nor the shapeliness of her face. From the top of  
 Her head there oozed out blood and fire mixed together.  
 Like the drops on pine-bark, so the flesh from her bones 1200  
 Dropped away, torn by the hidden fang of the poison.  
 It was a fearful sight; and terror held us all  
 From touching the corpse. We had learned from what  
     had happened.  
 But her wretched father, knowing nothing of the event,  
 Came suddenly to the house, and fell upon the corpse, 1205  
 And at once cried out and folded his arms about her,  
 And kissed her and spoke to her, saying, "O my poor  
     child,  
 What heavenly power has so shamefully destroyed you?  
 And who has set me here like an ancient sepulcher,  
 Deprived of you? O let me die with you, my child!" 1210  
 And when he had made an end of his wailing and crying,  
 Then the old man wished to raise himself to his feet;  
 But, as the ivy clings to the twigs of the laurel,  
 So he stuck to the fine dress, and he struggled fearfully.  
 For he was trying to lift himself to his knee, 1215  
 And she was pulling him down, and when he tugged hard  
 He would be ripping his aged flesh from his bones.  
 At last his life was quenched, and the unhappy man  
 Gave up the ghost, no longer could hold up his head.

# THE MEDEA

There they lie close, the daughter and the old father, 1  
 Dead bodies, an event he prayed for in his tears.  
 As for your interests, I will say nothing of them,  
 For you will find your own escape from punishment.  
 Our human life I think and have thought a shadow,  
 And I do not fear to say that those who are held 1225  
 Wise among men and who search the reasons of things  
 Are those who bring the most sorrow on themselves.  
 For of mortals there is no one who is happy.  
 If wealth flows in upon one, one may be perhaps  
 Luckier than one's neighbor, but still not happy. 1230  
 (*Exit.*)

## Chorus

Heaven, it seems, on this day has fastened many  
 Evils on Jason, and Jason has deserved them.  
 Poor girl, the daughter of Creon, how I pity you  
 And your misfortunes, you who have gone quite away  
 To the house of Hades because of marrying Jason. 1235

## Medea

Women, my task is fixed: as quickly as I may  
 To kill my children, and start away from this land,  
 And not, by wasting time, to suffer my children  
 To be slain by another hand less kindly to them.  
 Force every way will have it they must die, and since 1240  
 This must be so, then I, their mother, shall kill them.  
 Oh, arm yourself in steel, my heart! Do not hang back  
 From doing this fearful and necessary wrong.  
 Oh, come, my hand, poor wretched hand, and take the  
 sword,  
 Take it, step forward to this bitter starting point, 1245  
 And do not be a coward, do not think of them,  
 How sweet they are, and how you are their mother. Just  
 for  
 This one short day be forgetful of your children,  
 Afterward weep; for even though you will kill them,  
 They were very dear—Oh, I am an unhappy woman! 1250  
 (*With a cry she rushes into the house.*)

*Chorus*

O Earth, and the far shining  
 Ray of the Sun, look down, look down upon  
 This poor lost woman, look, before she raises  
 The hand of murder against her flesh and blood.  
 Yours was the golden birth from which 1255  
 She sprang, and now I fear divine  
 Blood may be shed by men.  
 O heavenly light, hold back her hand,  
 Check her, and drive from out the house  
 The bloody Fury raised by fiends of Hell. 1260

Vain waste, your care of children;  
 Was it in vain you bore the babes you loved,  
 After you passed the inhospitable strait  
 Between the dark blue rocks, Symplegades?  
 O wretched one, how has it come, 1265  
 This heavy anger on your heart,  
 This cruel bloody mind?  
 For God from mortals asks a stern  
 Price for the stain of kindred blood  
 In like disaster falling on their homes. 1270

(*A cry from one of the children is heard.*)

*Chorus*

Do you hear the cry, do you hear the children's cry?  
 O you hard heart, O woman fated for evil!

*One of the children (from within)*

What can I do and how escape my mother's hands?

*Another child (from within)*

O my dear brother, I cannot tell. We are lost.

*Chorus*

Shall I enter the house? Oh, surely I should 1275  
 Defend the children from murder.

# THE MEDEA

*A child (from within)*

O help us, in God's name, for now we need your help.  
Now, now we are close to it. We are trapped by the sword.

*Chorus*

O your heart must have been made of rock or steel,  
You who can kill 1280  
With your own hand the fruit of your own womb.  
Of one alone I have heard, one woman alone  
Of those of old who laid her hands on her children,  
Ino, sent mad by heaven when the wife of Zeus  
Drove her out from her home and made her wander; 1285  
And because of the wicked shedding of blood  
Of her own children she threw  
Herself, poor wretch, into the sea and stepped away  
Over the sea-cliff to die with her two children.  
What horror more can be? O women's love, 1290  
So full of trouble,  
How many evils have you caused already!

*(Enter Jason, with attendants.)*

*Jason*

You women, standing close in front of this dwelling,  
Is she, Medea, she who did this dreadful deed,  
Still in the house, or has she run away in flight? 1295  
For she will have to hide herself beneath the earth,  
Or raise herself on wings into the height of air,  
If she wishes to escape the royal vengeance.  
Does she imagine that, having killed our rulers,  
She will herself escape uninjured from this house? 1300  
But I am thinking not so much of her as for  
The children—her the king's friends will make to suffer  
For what she did. So I have come to save the lives  
Of my boys, in case the royal house should harm them  
While taking vengeance for their mother's wicked deed. 1305

*Chorus*

O Jason, if you but knew how deeply you are  
Involved in sorrow, you would not have spoken so.

*Jason*

What is it? That she is planning to kill me also?

*Chorus*

Your children are dead, and by their own mother's hand.

*Jason*

What! That is it? O woman, you have destroyed me! 1310

*Chorus*

You must make up your mind your children are no more.

*Jason*

Where did she kill them? Was it here or in the house?

*Chorus*

Open the gates and there you will see them murdered.

*Jason*

Quick as you can unlock the doors, men, and undo  
The fastenings and let me see this double evil, 1315  
My children dead and her—Oh her I will repay.

*(His attendants rush to the door. Medea appears above  
the house in a chariot drawn by dragons. She has  
the dead bodies of the children with her.)*

*Medea*

Why do you batter these gates and try to unbar them,  
Seeking the corpses and for me who did the deed?  
You may cease your trouble, and if you have need of me,  
Speak, if you wish. You will never touch me with your  
hand, 1320  
Such a chariot has Helius, my father's father,  
Given me to defend me from my enemies.

*Jason*

You hateful thing, you woman most utterly loathed  
 By the gods and me and by all the race of mankind,  
 You who have had the heart to raise a sword against 1325  
 Your children, you, their mother, and left me childless—  
 You have done this, and do you still look at the sun  
 And at the earth, after these most fearful doings?  
 I wish you dead. Now I see it plain, though at that time  
 I did not, when I took you from your foreign home 1330  
 And brought you to a Greek house, you, an evil thing,  
 A traitress to your father and your native land.  
 The gods hurled the avenging curse of yours on me.  
 For your own brother you slew at your own hearthside,  
 And then came aboard that beautiful ship, the Argo. 1335  
 And that was your beginning. When you were married  
 To me, your husband, and had borne children to me,  
 For the sake of pleasure in the bed you killed them.  
 There is no Greek woman who would have dared such  
 deeds,  
 Out of all those whom I passed over and chose you 1340  
 To marry instead, a bitter destructive match,  
 A monster, not a woman, having a nature  
 Wilder than that of Scylla in the Tuscan sea.  
 Ah! no, not if I had ten thousand words of shame  
 Could I sting you. You are naturally so brazen. 1345  
 Go, worker in evil, stained with your children's blood.  
 For me remains to cry aloud upon my fate,  
 Who will get no pleasure from my newly wedded love,  
 And the boys whom I begot and brought up, never  
 Shall I speak to them alive. Oh, my life is over! 1350

*Medea*

Long would be the answer which I might have made to  
 These words of yours, if Zeus the father did not know  
 How I have treated you and what you did to me.  
 No, it was not to be that you should scorn my love,  
 And pleasantly live your life through, laughing at me; 1355  
 Nor would the princess, nor he who offered the match,



Creon, drive me away without paying for it.  
 So now you may call me a monster, if you wish,  
 A Scylla housed in the caves of the Tuscan sea.  
 I too, as I had to, have taken hold of your heart. 1360

*Jason*  
 You feel the pain yourself. You share in my sorrow.

*Medea*  
 Yes, and my grief is gain when you cannot mock it.

*Jason*  
 O children, what a wicked mother she was to you!

*Medea*  
 They died from a disease they caught from their father.

*Jason*  
 I tell you it was not my hand that destroyed them. 1365

*Medea*  
 But it was your insolence, and your virgin wedding.

*Jason*  
 And just for the sake of that you chose to kill them.

*Medea*  
 Is love so small a pain, do you think, for a woman?

*Jason*  
 For a wise one, certainly. But you are wholly evil.

*Medea*  
 The children are dead. I say this to make you suffer. 1370

*Jason*  
 The children, I think, will bring down curses on you.

*Medea*  
 The gods know who was the author of this sorrow.

THE MEDEA

*Jason*

Yes, the gods know indeed, they know your loathsome heart.

*Medea*

Hate me. But I tire of your barking bitterness.

*Jason*

And I of yours. It is easier to leave you. 1375

*Medea*

How then? What shall I do? I long to leave you too.

*Jason*

Give me the bodies to bury and to mourn them.

*Medea*

No, that I will not. I will bury them myself,  
 Bearing them to Hera's temple on the promontory;  
 So that no enemy may evilly treat them 1380  
 By tearing up their grave. In this land of Corinth  
 I shall establish a holy feast and sacrifice  
 Each year for ever to atone for the blood guilt.  
 And I myself go to the land of Erechtheus  
 To dwell in Aegeus' house, the son of Pandion. 1385  
 While you, as is right, will die without distinction,  
 Struck on the head by a piece of the Argo's timber,  
 And you will have seen the bitter end of my love.

*Jason*

May a Fury for the children's sake destroy you,  
 And justice, Requitoe of blood. 1390

*Medea*

What heavenly power lends an ear  
 To a breaker of oaths, a deceiver?

*Jason*

Oh, I hate you, murderess of children.

*Medea*

Go to your palace. Bury your bride.

*Jason*

I go, with two children to mourn for.

1395

*Medea*

Not yet do you feel it. Wait for the future.

*Jason*

Oh, children I loved!

*Medea*

I loved them, you did not.

*Jason*

You loved them, and killed them.

*Medea*

To make you feel pain.

*Jason*

Oh, wretch that I am, how I long  
To kiss the dear lips of my children!

1400

*Medea*

Now you would speak to them, now you would kiss them.  
Then you rejected them.

*Jason*

Let me, I beg you,  
Touch my boys' delicate flesh.

*Medea*

I will not. Your words are all wasted.

*Jason*

O God, do you hear it, this persecution,  
These my sufferings from this hateful  
Woman, this monster, murderess of children?

1405

THE MEDEA

Still what I can do that I will do:  
I will lament and cry upon heaven,  
Calling the gods to bear me witness  
How you have killed my boys and prevent me from  
Touching their bodies or giving them burial.  
I wish I had never begot them to see them  
Afterward slaughtered by you.

1410

*Chorus*

Zeus in Olympus is the overseer  
Of many doings. Many things the gods  
Achieve beyond our judgment. What we thought  
Is not confirmed and what we thought not god  
Contrives. And so it happens in this story.

1415

(*Curtain.*)



# THE HERACLEIDAE

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

RALPH GLADSTONE



## INTRODUCTION TO THE HERACLEIDAE

### *The Legend*

Eurystheus, king of Argos, was given control over his cousin Heracles through the contrivance of Hera. He persecuted Heracles throughout that hero's life, sending him on the famous and perilous "Labors." After Heracles had died and been transformed into a god, Eurystheus continued to persecute the family. Wherever these disinherited refugees went, he would send his herald to demand that they be denied sanctuary. He was the most powerful king in Greece, and none dared resist him. But in Attica the Heracleidae finally found a state which was willing to defend their rights; and when Eurystheus invaded Attica to claim them by force, he was defeated and killed.

Such were the main outlines of the legend, at least the Athenian legend (there was a Theban variant as well). Aeschylus had written a tragedy on the subject, and Athenian playwrights loved to glorify an ancient Athens which had stood up for the weak and the oppressed (Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*; Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*; Euripides, *The Suppliants*, *Medea*, *Heracles*). There are certain details which Euripides either invented or chose to emphasize. He is the first, as far as we know, to bring in the self-immolation of a daughter of Heracles. He also makes a major character out of Iolaus, Heracles' nephew and old companion-in-arms, at the expense of Hyllus, the eldest of the Heracleidae. Some said Hyllus killed Eurystheus, others that Iolaus did. Euripides makes Hyllus a son who is of fighting age, and the messenger's account of the battle gives him an honorable part, but Hyllus



never appears on stage. The leader of the Heracleidae is Iolaus, a decrepit but indomitable warrior who is rejuvenated in the course of battle and becomes the hero of the day. Finally, instead of having Eurystheus killed in battle (all other authorities do, as far as we know), Euripides makes Iolaus take him prisoner and have him handed over to Alcmena, who puts him to death over the protests of the Athenians. This last feature may have a bearing on the date and occasion of the play.

### *The Date*

No date for this play has been given by ancient authorities. The versification has technical qualities which find a parallel in three early-dated tragedies: *Alcestis* (438 B.C.), *Medea* (431 B.C.), and *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.). The dating and interpretation may be further helped if we consider an event which took place between autumn of 430 and winter or early spring of 429 B.C. At that time Athens was at war with the Peloponnesian League. Five Peloponnesian envoys, on their way to the king of Persia, were treacherously seized by friends of the Athenians in Thrace, brought to Athens, and there "put to death on the day of their arrival, without trial and without permission to say some things they wished to say" (Thucydides ii. 67. 4; also mentioned by Herodotus vii. 137. 3). Since our play deals with the summary execution of an unarmed prisoner and was written at some date not far from 430, we can hardly ignore this event. Of course, *The Heracleidae* may have been written and produced earlier; but if we date it just after the execution of the envoys, we may understand why Euripides chose to end the play with the execution of Eurystheus instead of his death in battle.

This abruptly changes the whole direction of the play and reverses our sympathies. From the beginning, we have been made to take the side of the innocent Heracleidae and their gallant protectors against the wicked king, who, not content with his abuse of the father, insists on hunting the children and their feeble guardians to death. It is as simple as that, sheer white against black. The outrageousness of the Argive

king is aggravated by a truculent herald; the virtue of the afflicted by the self-sacrifice of a virgin martyr. But when at last Eurystheus appears, he is nothing like his herald; he frankly admits his past misdeeds, neither extenuating nor boasting, and faces death with calm dignity. It is Alcmena who turns horrible in her insistence on revenge, while the Athenians (represented by the chorus) appear, though Euripides does his best for them, as nothing much better than weak well-meaners.

Why has this been done, when following the accepted (so we presume) legend and having Eurystheus killed in battle would have meant an acceptable "straight" play? Euripides knew that brutality brutalizes; people who have been injured or abused too long become worse than their tormentors (Medea, Hecuba, Creusa, Electra, Orestes, Dionysus). But this reversal is uncommonly sudden and lacks the careful and convincing motivation which we find in *Medea*, *Ion*, *Orestes*, and elsewhere. I would hazard a guess that the envoys were executed in the winter, not very long before the spring productions; that Euripides was still at work on *The Heracleidae*, and the event made him change the end of the play to suit the occasion. There are certain signs of haste in the writing. Euripides obviously could and did write iambics at breakneck speed, but *The Heracleidae* has a smaller proportion of the far more difficult choral lyric than any other Euripidean play. If the manuscript is sound (but it may not be) the end of the play is carelessly composed. One other point is the more than usual emphasis on woman's place in a modest, but determined, maiden's apology for public appearance; it recalls the pronouncement of Pericles in the winter of 431-430 to the effect that women should not even be seen, much less heard (Thucydides ii. 45. 2).

My guess, then, is spring 429 B.C. for this play. The execution was a horror, the worse because just retaliation was pleaded, as if two wrongs were to make a right. But both Athens and Sparta were to do far worse still. This play has an Athens still unbrutalized, though acquiescent; it is the wronged and rescued suppliants who turn beastly; and who

are these but the ancestors of the Lacedaemonians, after all? The Argives (neutral in 429; but one Argive was executed at Athens) are not so bad as we thought, though all heralds grow arrogant on their sacred immunity. There is plenty of "glorious Athens," and "liberty" is a key word. But Athens has slipped, this once. Euripides' faith in his city is not to be broken for a long time, but here is reproof and warning.

### *The Play*

It is rapid, with little lyric or high poetry, not profound but, despite the melodrama, often shrewd. The young king is really a democrat in disguise; will do nothing without the people's consent; and therefore, while ready to protect the afflicted, cannot help wishing (like the king in *The Suppliants* of Aeschylus) that these particular suppliants had never come his way. Macaria seems a mere abstraction of virtue, until her outburst at Iolaus, when he offers to spoil her act, shows her as human after all. The most challenging piece of treatment is that accorded to Iolaus. Why must he be so old? We are not to press legendary ages, but, after all, Iolaus was of the generation of Hyllus, not of Alcmene; he was the nephew of Heracles, not his uncle. Probably, for one thing, for the story. The point is that the Heracleidae are helpless until helped by Athens and cannot be protected by two strong fighters of their own. So Hyllus comes in as an afterthought and is kept (with his army) off stage, while Iolaus is superannuated. Therefore, also, Demophon is king of Athens instead of Good King Theseus, as in other versions; Demophon can be more plausibly represented as a younger man. But also the theme of resolute old age and of rejuvenation seems to fascinate the tragedian. The prototype is Laertes in the 24th book of the *Odyssey*. But it has been suggested that Aeschylus in his lost play rejuvenated Iolaus, and, if so, Euripides is (as elsewhere) having his fun with Aeschylus. For there is irony, at least, in the treatment of Iolaus. As to whether the miracle ever took place at all, the messenger prefaces his account in the best manner of Herodotus, the scientific historian of the day: "Up

to this point [the prayer of Iolaus] I am telling you what I saw; for what followed, I am telling you what they tell me." Note that no rejuvenated Iolaus returns to the stage. The going forth to battle of Iolaus is indisputably comic, though it is that tragic funniness that makes old age so cruel (Aeschylus with Cilissa in *The Libation Bearers*, the Prophetess in *The Eumenides*). As so often, Euripides has tried to cram too much into one play, to move in too many directions at once; but he has made livelier what started as a most conventional piece.

One feature of the play is the supernumerary male children of Heracles. They are on stage, presumably, from start to finish, though they say nothing. The play is named from them, not, as usually, from the chorus or a principal character. Neither the daughter of Heracles nor the herald is named in the text. The names Macaria and Copreus are in the ancient *dramatis personae*. The latter comes from the *Iliad*. The scene is at Marathon, on the coast of Attica.

## CHARACTERS

*Iolaus, an old man and friend of Heracles*

*Copreus, herald of Eurystheus*

*Chorus of old men of Marathon*

*Demophon, son of Theseus and king of Athen.*

*Macaria, daughter of Heracles*

*Alcmene, mother of Heracles*

*Attendants*

*Eurystheus, king of Argos and Mycenae*

*Small children of Heracles, guards, townspeople*

## THE HERACLEIDAE

SCENE: *Before the Temple of Zeus at Marathon.*

(*Iolaus, accompanied by small children  
of Heracles, enters.*)

*Iolaus*

For years I've known that anyone who's just  
Is born to serve his neighbors, but the man  
Who will persist in feathering his nest  
Has got no public spirit and is hard  
To deal with, as I've found out to my cost. 5  
And though I could have lived respectably  
In Argos, with my family and in peace,  
As right-hand man of Heracles, I served  
Through his worst trials, while he still was alive.  
Now he's in heaven, and as guardian of 10  
His children, I could use a guard myself.  
When he was dead and gone, Eurystheus  
Decided to eliminate us, too.  
We got away, and, though we saved our skins,  
Our home is gone; and now we stand condemned 15  
To keep on wandering from state to state,  
Because this king, whose record is as black  
As sin, has had the front to lay on us  
A new humiliation. Anywhere  
We go, when he finds out, he sends someone 20  
To bully them into expelling us,  
And claims his town's too strong and he's too rich  
To risk offending. When our hosts recall  
That *these* are orphans, that *I've* no support,

# EURIPIDES

They cringe and end by sending us away. 25  
 With displaced children I displace myself  
 To share with those who have more than their share  
 Of sorrows. If I left them, men might say,  
 "He failed to do his duty by them, once 30  
 Their father died, in spite of family ties."  
 And since the rest of Greece is banned to us,  
 We've reached the neighborhood of Marathon  
 To throw ourselves upon the mercy of  
 The gods and seek their help. Two kings, I'm told,  
 Of Pandion's and Theseus' line have here 35  
 Come into power, both our relatives.  
 That's why we've come to the world-famous state  
 Of Athens, on a trip conceived and planned  
 By two old strategists. So I, for one,  
 Am seeing to the safety of these boys. 40  
 Meanwhile Alcmene minds the girls and keeps  
 Them all inside the temple. It would look  
 Highly improper if we let them stand  
 In front of it, exposed to people's eyes.  
 Then Hyllus and the older boys have gone 45  
 To find another refuge, just in case  
 We ever should be forced to leave this town.  
 Quick, children! Come back! Hold on tight!  
 That's Eurystheus' herald coming here,  
 The one that has us chased from place to place, 50

(Enter Copreus.)

And made us homeless refugees. Scum!  
 I'll see you damned and your employer too.  
 Why, you're the selfsame man who used to bring  
 Bad news repeatedly to Heracles.

Copreus

Oh come now, do you really think you've found 55  
 A refuge and protection? Are you mad  
 Enough to think that anyone would choose  
 Your helplessness in preference to our strength?

THE HERACLEIDAE

Why don't you stop this fuss? You're bound to come  
Right back to Argos and a stony end. 60

*Iolaus*

Not on your life! I'm well protected by  
God's temple and this free and sovereign state.

*Copreus*

Oh, then you'll give my muscles exercise?

*Iolaus*

You wouldn't dare to take us out by force.

*Copreus*

You'll soon see how wrong that prediction is. 65

*(Tries to seize children.)*

*Iolaus*

Then over my dead body, if you do.

*Copreus*

Keep out of this. I need no leave from you  
To take away my master's property.

*(Throws Iolaus down.)*

*Iolaus*

Help! Men of this historic town, though we're  
Protected by Zeus's temple in the square, 70  
We've been assaulted and our wreaths defiled,  
Which outrages the city and the gods!

*Chorus*

You there! Just what's the meaning of all this  
Ungodly noise, and by the altar too?  
Oh! This poor old man is lying 75  
On the ground. What a shameful thing!  
Who was it handled you so brutally?



*Iolaus*

This man here dragged me from the altar by  
Main force, and showed contempt for all your gods.

*Chorus*

What country are you coming from, old man?  
Have you reached these federated states  
By the blade of the oar in the sea? Were you  
Rowed over here from some Euboean port?

*Iolaus*

No, we're no islanders. We've made our way  
To Athens from Mycenae.

*Chorus*

And what name did you go by  
Among the Mycenaean citizens?

*Iolaus*

You've heard of me, I think. I'm Iolaus,  
Known as the right-hand man of Heracles.

*Chorus*

The name has a familiar ring. But please,  
Why don't you tell us whose young children these  
Are, whom you're leading by the hand?

*Iolaus*

These are the sons of Heracles, who've come  
To ask protection here from you and yours.

*Chorus*

Just what is it you want of us? Are you  
Applying for a hearing here?

*Iolaus*

We ask you to stand by us and to keep  
The Argives from abducting us by force.

THE HERACLEIDAE

*Copreus*

That's hardly good enough. Your betters here  
Have found you and will have the final say. 100

*Chorus*

The rights of those the gods protect  
Are bound to be respected. To go off  
And leave an altar desecrated makes  
A mockery of justice.

*Copreus*

Who spoke of such a thing? I'm asking you 105  
To drive my master's subjects from the land.

*Chorus*

That would be sacrilegious,  
Rejecting people who demand our help.

*Copreus*

It would be healthier to change your minds  
And keep your city out of trouble's way. 110

*Chorus*

Instead of kidnapping these refugees  
So brazenly, you should have seen the king  
And shown respect for Athens' sovereign rights.

*Copreus*

Now that you mention it, who is the king?

*Chorus*

Demophon, son of the great Theseus. 115

*Copreus*

Oh, then my business lies with him! All this  
Is just a waste of breath and nothing more.

*Chorus*

Look! There he comes, and his brother Acamas.  
They're hurrying to judge this whole affair.

(*Enter Demophon, with Acamas.*)

*Demophon*

Since you old men rushed here upon the scene, 120  
Before the young ones helped or reached the shrine,  
Suppose you tell us just what's drawn this crowd?

*Chorus*

These children, who have hung the altar with  
The wreaths you see, are Heracles' sons.  
Iolaus was their father's right-hand man. 125

*Demophon*

But why were there such awful cries for help?

*Chorus*

That man just tried to drag them all away,  
Which caused the cries we heard. The way he threw  
That poor old man down touched me to the heart.

*Demophon*

Although he looks and dresses like a Greek, 130  
It needs a savage to behave like that.  
Stranger, it's up to you. Be quick and let  
Me know what sort of country you come from.

*Copreus*

Well, since you ask, I come from Argos. Now  
I'll tell who sent me and just why I'm here. 135  
It was Eurystheus of Mycenae told  
Me to come here and bring these back. I have  
Authority for all I do or say;  
Since, as an Argive, I'm recovering  
These Argive nationals who've run away, 140

Though legally condemned to death at home.  
 We have a perfect right to carry out  
 The laws we make for our own sovereign land.  
 I've often made this point, each time I reached  
 A new "protector." Not a single one 145  
 Was ever rash enough to play with fire.  
 Now they've come here. Why, they must take you for  
 Colossal fools, or else they want to take  
 One reckless chance and get it over with.  
 They can't think seriously that you alone 150  
 Of all the Greeks they've seen would feel for them  
 In their sad state, unless you'd lost your minds;  
 Consider what you stand to gain if you  
 Should let them in or let us take them out.  
 For our part we can offer to you all 155  
 The weight of power; our king's great influence  
 Will be behind your town in all you do.  
 But if their artful talk and wailing move  
 Your pity, that can only mean one thing.  
 A total war! Don't you believe that we'll 160  
 Give up our fight and bring no steel into play.  
 But why should you provoke us? Have we seized  
 What's yours? Are we aggressors? Or is your  
 Allies' security at stake? What kind  
 Of cause is this to die for? Your own men 165  
 Will surely curse your name if you insist  
 On scuttling everything so recklessly  
 For these young brats and this half-dead old man.  
 You may believe the long view bears you out,  
 But that will hardly help you now, my friend. 170  
 These boys would never stand against our arms,  
 Not even as grown men, as you may hope.  
 Well, anyhow that day's far off, and you'll  
 Be dealt with in the meantime; take my word  
 For that. We're asking nothing, but we want 175  
 To take back what is ours. I know that you  
 Are in the habit of declaring for  
 The underdog by choice. I warn you. Don't.

*Chorus*

It's very hard to judge or understand  
A case like this until we've heard both sides. 180

*Iolaus*

I'll say in your land's favor, Majesty,  
I'm not being driven out of *here* at least  
Until I've listened and have had my say.  
This man is nothing to us, and we want  
No part of Argos. That's been so since they 185  
Passed sentence on us; we're expatriates.

What earthly right has he to drag us all  
Back to the town that drove us out, as though  
They still had claims on us. We're aliens now.  
Must Argive exiles leave the rest of Greece? 190

You can't intimidate Athenians  
And make them drive out Heracles' own sons.  
This isn't an Achaean town, you know,  
Or Trachis, so your heavy-handed ways  
Of getting temples to evict us and 195  
Your saber-rattling will not work here.

If I were wrong, and you should have your way,  
This wouldn't be the free state that I know.  
But I *do* know what stuff they're made of here.  
They'd sooner die. Like all right-thinking men 200  
They're sure that death is better than disgrace.

So much for Athens. It's a bad mistake  
To overpraise, and I myself have been  
Annoyed at getting more than was my due.  
But, I'll explain why you're in duty bound 205  
To save these boys, as ruler of this land.

Pittheus was Pelops' son and in his turn  
Sired Aethra, who gave birth to Theseus,  
Your father. Now, to come back to these boys,  
Their father springs from Zeus and Alcmene, 210  
And she was Pelops' daughter, which would make  
Near cousins of your father and of theirs.  
So much for ties of blood, and now I'll tell

What else obliges you to stand up for them.  
 I carried Heracles' own shield upon 215  
 The bloody expedition to bring back  
 For Theseus the Amazon queen's belt.  
 And Heracles, as every Greek knows, saved  
 Your father from the moated depths of hell.  
 And in return, what they now ask of you 220  
 Is not to be betrayed, not to be torn  
 By force from altars and from your frontiers.  
 It would be a disgrace for you, for all  
 Of Athens to let refugees—and those  
 Your cousins, too—be dragged off. Oh, my God! 225  
 Just look at them! On my knees I beg of you!  
 For pity's sake! Oh please don't let them go!  
 The sons of Heracles are in your hands.  
 Then prove yourself their cousin and their friend,  
 Their father, brother, ruler, all in one, 230  
 Rather than throw them to their enemies.

*Chorus*

This story touches all our hearts. We've seen  
 Now for the first time what it is to be  
 Well-born, yet in distress. Nobility  
 Can suffer, and through no fault of its own. 235

*Demophon*

Three factors have decided me against  
 Expelling, Iolaus, friends and guests.  
 For, first and foremost, you took refuge at  
 God's altar, with these children at your side.  
 Then family ties, and for our father's sake, 240  
 A debt of honor to be kind to them.  
 Last, but not least, concern for my prestige.  
 If I let strangers break the temple bounds,  
 Then everyone will say we gave these up  
 To Argos out of fear and that we're not 245  
 Our own real masters here. I'd sooner die.  
 Don't be afraid. I wish you could have come

E U R I P I D E S

In better days, but nobody would dare  
To touch you or the children while you're here.

(To Herald.)

Go back home, and there say to your king 250  
He'll have a hearing if he likes, but you  
Won't take these refugees away with you.

*Copreus*

Not even if my claim is right and wins?

*Demophon*

What? Right to drag off refugees by force?

*Copreus*

If I get a bad name, it won't hurt you. 255

*Demophon*

But I will too, if I let you drag them home.

*Copreus*

Just banish them, I'll do the rest myself.

*Demophon*

You fool! To think you can outwit the god!

*Copreus*

This is a nest for outlaws, I can see.

*Demophon*

The temple gives protection to all men. 260

*Copreus*

My countrymen may not agree with you.

*Demophon*

But I'm the master when in my own house.

THE HERACLEIDAE

*Copreus*

If you behave yourself and don't harm us.

*Demophon*

I'll chance that rather than outrage the gods.

*Copreus*

I wouldn't want to see you fighting us.

265

*Demophon*

No more would I, but still I'll stand by these.

*Copreus*

I'll take what's mine back with me, just the same.

*Demophon*

You think so? Well, you won't get very far.

*Copreus*

In any case I'll try the thing and see.

*(Tries to seize children again.)*

*Demophon*

You'll lay a hand on them at your own risk!

270

*(Makes threatening motion.)*

*Chorus*

For heaven's sake, don't hit a diplomat.

*Demophon*

Then let the diplomat behave himself.

*Chorus*

Yes, go away. Don't touch him, Majesty!

*Copreus*

I'm going, since I'm quite outnumbered here.

But I'll return with armies at my back.

275

There's an enormous army waiting for



Me with Eurystheus at the head. He's at  
 The boundaries of Alcathus' own state  
 And stands on the alert. So when he hears  
 Of this disgrace, he'll strike you like a flash, 280  
 You and your land and every living thing.  
 What are our soldiers for if not to fight  
 And punish you, who give us ample cause?

*Demophon*

To hell with you! Your Argos won't make me  
 Give in an inch, and you won't drag these off 285  
 And shame us, since we take no orders here  
 From Argos, but we do just as we like.

(*Exit Copreus.*)

*Chorus*

Time to think about defense  
 Before their army strikes our soil.  
 Argives were always bloodthirsty, but now 290  
 What they'll soon learn will make them twice as fierce.  
 Since diplomats are all alike and will  
 Distort and magnify what they've gone through.  
 I know he'll tell his lord he was so  
 Mistreated here that, all in all, 295  
 He barely got his skin away.

*Iolaus*

There's nothing better for a boy than to  
 Have had a good and noble father and  
 To marry well. I can't approve of those  
 Who go below their station out of love 300  
 And compromise their sons through their own lust.  
 Since noble people stand adversity  
 Much better than the mob; for instance, we  
 Were at our last gasp, till we found these friends  
 And relatives. Alone of all the Greeks, 305  
 They've dared to stand up and defend our rights.  
 There, children, go and give your hand to them,  
 And you give your hand too. Now, go ahead!

# THE HERACLEIDAE

O children, these are really friends in need.  
 If you should ever see your native land 310  
 And home again and there receive your due,  
 Remember them as friends who saved your lives.  
 With this in mind, don't ever fight with them  
 At all, but treat them as your best allies.  
 They've earned your full respect by taking on 315  
 A formidable enemy on our  
 Account. Though we'd no place to lay our heads,  
 They didn't drive us out or let us go  
 For all of that. And I for one must say  
 That while I live and breathe—and after, too— 320  
 I'll honor you like Theseus and I'll sing  
 Your praises everywhere and tell the world  
 How well you treated and protected these  
 Young children. You've kept up your father's name  
 In Greece. You're living up to the high standard 325  
 Set by your great family in every way.  
 That's most unusual. You'll find, I think,  
 That very few men match their fathers now.

## *Chorus*

We've always felt it was the decent thing  
 To succor men who couldn't help themselves. 330  
 We've fought for others many times before,  
 And now we see a new war coming up.

## *Demophon*

Thank you. I'm sure of your sincerity,  
 Old man, and that you're grateful, as you say.  
 And now I've got to mobilize my men 335  
 And station them so that the enemy  
 Will get a hot reception. First my scouts  
 Will go to see we're not caught by surprise.  
 The Argives waste no time in their attacks.  
 Meanwhile I'll sacrifice with seers, but 340  
 You take the children from this altar and  
 Go to my palace. You'll be in good hands  
 While this keeps me away. Why, go ahead.

*Iolaus*

No, I'll stay at the altar. We'll sit down  
 And wait and pray until you've won the fight. 345  
 And when your triumph is complete, we'll go  
 Home with you. I think that the gods  
 On our side are more than a match for theirs.  
 Hera may be their patron but we have  
 Athena; and what counts in the long run 350  
 Is having stronger gods upon your side.  
 Pallas will never let the others win.

*(Exit Demophon.)**Chorus*

## STROPHE

Then brag away until you're hoarse.  
 But know that Argive bluster can't  
 Affect our minds, nor can it force 355  
 Us to turn tail. Not for such rant  
 As this of yours to bring our great  
 And lovely city down so low  
 And leave her prey to such a fate.  
 To think you and your king are so 360  
 Crack-brained as that!

## ANTISTROPHE

To kidnap refugees, and those  
 The wards of both our gods and men,  
 Is bad enough, for one who knows  
 Our state's as good as yours; and then 365  
 To have a stranger treat our king  
 Like dirt, without a single claim  
 To right and justice is a thing  
 That only fools and men past shame  
 Can well defend. 370

## EPODE

We're peaceful men, but in advance  
 We warn a king who's gone berserk  
 To keep away. He'll have no chance  
 To carry out his dirty work.

# THE HERACLEIDAE

Though butchery's his special field, 375  
 We'll hold our own if it should come  
 To handling a spear or shield.  
 He'd better keep his creatures from  
 Attacking Athens, hold his hand,  
 And not pollute our lovely land. 380

(*Re-enter Demophon.*)

*Iolaus*

My son, why are you looking so depressed?  
 Bad news about the Argive movements? Don't  
 Keep us all guessing. Is all quiet or  
 Are they advancing? What their herald said  
 Is worth attention, as their king will come 385  
 Here as the pet of chance and of the gods,  
 And cordially detests this city, to boot.  
 Still, in the end, Zeus sees to it that no  
 One can afford such high and mighty airs.

*Demophon*

The Argives and their king are on the way.  
 I've reconnoitered, since a man who sets 390  
 Up for a decent general has got  
 To see these things himself, not second-hand.  
 They haven't reached the plain; their leader keeps  
 Them on the rocky cliff. He's looking for  
 A way to bring his army to the heart 395  
 Of Attica, and camp there, I should think,  
 Without unnecessary risk. And our  
 Own preparations are complete; the town  
 Is on a battle footing. We're about  
 To offer all the things up to the gods 400  
 Required to save us and to win the fight.  
 While priests are sacrificing everywhere,  
 I've had all oracles, all old and well-known  
 Or confidential forecasts analyzed  
 To find out what to do. In most respects 405  
 They varied a great deal, but in one thing  
 They tally every one: we have to give

Up to Demeter's child as victim a  
 Young lady of respectable descent.  
 Now you'll admit, I've done my best for you. 410  
 But I can hardly kill my child, or force  
 Another citizen to such a point.  
 Only a lunatic would let his child  
 Be killed that way, and angry groups in all  
 The streets are thrashing out the question now. 415  
 Some say we're bound to fight for refugees;  
 While others claim I've acted like a fool.  
 So if I did this for you, I would have  
 A full-scale civil war upon my hands.  
 However, maybe you can find a way 420  
 To save yourselves and us as well without  
 My losing face upon this issue. As  
 I'm not a tyrant over savages,  
 Good government must be both give and take.

*Chorus*

We're anxious to defend you, but the gods 425  
 Now seem determined not to let us fight.

*Iolaus*

O children, we're like sailors who've set through  
 A hurricane and almost reached the shore,  
 Only to have the wind veer round and blow  
 Us back to sea. And we ourselves are forced 430  
 Out of the harbor in that same way, although  
 We'd thought that we were safe inside the port.  
 O God! How terrible to have a hope  
 That charms and cheats you. Still, I know that you  
 Are not to blame. I can't expect you to 435  
 Kill off your subjects' children. This whole state  
 Has done its best. Although the gods see fit  
 To treat us this way, still I won't forget.  
 I don't know what to do, boys, since we've no  
 More refuges to try, and no more gods 440  
 To pray to, no more countries in the world

To emigrate to. We're as good as gone.  
 The game is up. I don't care for myself,  
 Although I hate to let the Argives have  
 The joy of killing me; it's you that drive 445  
 Me frantic, and your poor old grandmother,  
 Brought down so low at such a time of life!  
 But all I've gone through doesn't count at all;  
 We're absolutely destined from the start  
 To fall and be cut down like animals. 450  
 Yet maybe you can think of something. I  
 Still think there may be some way out; why don't  
 You give me up instead of these young boys  
 And save their lives without risk to yourself?  
 That's it! I've got no cause to hang onto 455  
 My life, and their king would be very pleased  
 To catch and torture Heracles' good friend.  
 The man's quite low enough. A man with brains  
 Had better fight with someone of his class,  
 And so get decent treatment when he's down. 460

*Chorus*

Oh please don't put the blame on us. To hear  
 Ourselves accused of giving you away  
 Sounds ugly, even though it's not deserved.

*Demophon*

Said like a gentleman, but it won't do.

*(To Iolaus. Macaria enters while he speaks.)*

The king's not marching here for you; an old 465  
 Man's not worth bothering about. It's these  
 He wants to put out of the way, since, as  
 He's very well aware, young nobles with  
 A family score to settle can, when they  
 Grow up, make matters awkward for him then. 470  
 If you've another plan, let's hear it, since,  
 I don't mind telling you, these oracles  
 Have got me worried and at my wit's end.

*Macaria*

Strangers, before all else, I hope you won't  
Think it was brazen of me to come out. 475  
I know a woman should be quiet and  
Discreet, and that her place is in the home.  
Yet I came out because I heard your cries. (*Speaking to*  
*Iolaus.*)

Although I'm not the family head, I have  
A right to be concerned about the fate 480  
Of my own brothers, and I'd like to know,  
For my sake too, what new thing has turned up  
To plague you—as if this were not enough.

*Iolaus*

I've always thought your family contains  
No cooler head than yours, Macaria. 485  
The fact is, just when things were going well,  
We suddenly fell downward with a crash,  
Back where we were. The king's priests say he has  
To sacrifice—not just a bull or calf—  
A real live girl, of noble stock, to please 490  
Persephone, if any of us here  
Values his life. And that's our quandary.  
The king won't kill a stranger's child, much less  
His own, and hinted pretty plainly that  
If we see no way out, we'll have to find 495  
Another refuge. As for him, he's bound  
To think of his own country's safety first.

*Macaria*

And on that issue, then, we stand or fall?

*Iolaus*

All other matters being equal, yes.

*Macaria*

Then all your Argive fears are over, since 500  
This volunteer is quite prepared to die,  
And let herself be led off to the slaughter.

What could we say if Athens were to court  
 This frightful danger just for us, and we  
 Left all the brunt to them, and wouldn't help 505  
 Ourselves because we couldn't bear the thought  
 Of death. To keep on sniveling like this  
 At altars while we show to all the world  
 Our cowardice would admirably fit  
 Our father's name, or is it like the brave 510  
 To make fools of themselves? I'd sooner see  
 This city taken—God forbid—and let  
 Myself be caught and have worst come to worst  
 To Heracles' own child, and die that way.  
 If I give in and leave here, then how shall 515  
 I look when people ask why trembling slaves  
 Like us have come to ask protection there.  
 They'll turn us out and say they're not disposed  
 To lift a finger for such spineless things.  
 Why, even if I did survive the deaths 520  
 Of my own brothers, I'd have no hope left  
 (Though people have been known to sell their friends  
 Upon that chance). But who would marry me,  
 Or want this friendless girl as mother of  
 His sons? To end things now is much to be 525  
 Preferred to *that* shame, even though a girl  
 Not so well-known might well make the other choice.  
 Come, lead me to the place where I'm to die.  
 Then wreathe me and begin whenever you like;  
 And go and win the fight. I hereby put 530  
 Myself on record that of my free will  
 I volunteer to die for these and for  
 Myself. The brave have found no finer prize  
 Than leaving life the way it should be done.

*Chorus*

A girl who gives her own life to save these 535  
 And says such things leaves nothing unsaid.  
 No words could be compared to hers; no acts  
 Of flesh and blood rank higher than her own.



*Iolaus*

There speaks the hero's daughter, Heracles'  
 Own child. At any rate, there's no way to 540  
 Mistake *your* family tree. But, though I'm proud  
 Of what you've said, your plight goes to my heart.  
 Yet there's a better way. You ought to call  
 Your sisters and draw lots to choose the one  
 Who'll die to save us all. Why, otherwise, 545  
 It isn't fair for you to die this way.

*Macaria*

I *won't* be butchered as a gambling debt.  
 No, it won't do; there's nothing fine in that.  
 But if you'll take me and consent to use  
 Me of yourselves, I offer up my life 550  
 For them of my own accord, but won't be forced.

*Iolaus*

Wonder of wonders!  
 That answer was more splendid than the fine  
 One that you made before, if anything;  
 And you outdo yourself in pluck and sense. 555  
 I can't tell you to die or not to die,  
 Although your death will save your brothers' lives.

*Macaria*

Well put. Don't worry, no guilt can attach  
 To you, since I myself elect to die.  
 Come on; I'd like to have you hold me when 560  
 I die, and cover me up afterward,  
 Since now it's time to go to meet the knife,  
 If I'm my father's daughter, as I claim.

*Iolaus*

Oh, no, I couldn't bear to watch you die.

*Macaria*

Then ask the king to let me end my days 565  
 In women's hands, and not the hands of men.

*Demophon*

Poor girl! Of course, I never could forgive  
 Myself if I forgot the honors due  
 You, and God knows I've cause enough not to:  
 Your grit, your honest heart, such courage as 570  
 I've never known a woman show before.  
 Well, go ahead and speak to the old man  
 And children here, if you've a last request.

*Macaria*

This is goodbye. Please bring my brothers up  
 To be as wise as you, no more, no less, 575  
 In all, and I'll be satisfied. I count  
 On you to do your loyal best to save  
 Them, since we're your brood in a way, and raised  
 By your hands, and I'm giving up my prime  
 And chance for marriage just to die for them. 580  
 And now I wish to all my brothers here  
 The best of everything, and may you win  
 The things for which I'm staking my own life.  
 Be sure to pay respect to this old man  
 And your old grandmother inside as well, 585  
 And these good people. If the gods will let  
 You find relief and see your home again,  
 Remember to give the girl that saved your lives  
 The kind of funeral that she deserves,  
 Since she played fair with you and gave hers up. 590  
 These values will sustain me afterward  
 As spinster, childless. . . . Afterward: is there  
 An afterward? I hope not. If there's *then*  
 No end to all our troubles, where do we  
 Go on from there—since death itself, they say, 595  
 Supplies the cure for everything that ails?

*Iolaus*

As bravest of your sex, be sure that we  
 Would never think of failing to pay you

EURIPIDES

The highest honors, here and when you're gone.  
And so Godspeed, saving the pardon of  
The goddess in whose hands your life is placed. 600

(*Exit Macaria.*)

This shock's too much for me, and everything  
(*Totters.*)

Is going black. Quick, children, prop me up!  
Let me sit down and cover me with these.  
To flout the oracle would be the end of all 605  
Of us; though this alternative is sad,  
Still, it's the lesser evil of the two.

*Chorus*

STROPHE

In all our ups and downs a wise  
Man knows the gods have final say,  
Nor can one house monopolize 610  
Destiny, but from day to day  
Luck pirouettes, and people who  
Had conquered stoop, while drudges make  
Their fortunes overnight. But you  
Cannot get out of it or break 615  
Through by chicanery. You'll find  
To try's a waste, time out of mind.

ANTISTROPHE

Don't take God's orders lying down  
Or fret because Macaria's won 620  
A high and durable renown  
For kin and country. She's undone,  
For doing what will send her through  
The ages. A stout heart commands  
Its way through pain. In that she's true 625  
To everything her father stands  
For and her birthright, true as steel.  
The brave are gone; the quick must feel.

THE HERACLEIDAE

(Enter Attendant.)

*Attendant*

Come, children, can you tell where Iolaus 630  
And your own grandmother have gone from here?

*Iolaus*

Why here I am, as far as that's concerned.

*Attendant*

Reclining, with your head bowed down! What for?

*Iolaus*

The troubles of those near to me strike home.

*Attendant*

Well, now you can get up. Look at me, man. 635

*Iolaus*

I'm old and these old bones have got no strength.

*Attendant*

But I have news for you, and what news too!

*Iolaus*

Who are you? Where have I seen you before?

*Attendant*

I'm Hyllus' servant. Don't you know me yet?

*Iolaus*

You're a real friend! You're here to save us all? 640

*Attendant*

Yes, everything is going to be all right.

*Iolaus*

Alcmene, come on out. It's you I want  
To hear the wonderful news this man's brought.

You've worried yourself sick for so long now  
About your grandsons' trip. They're back at last. 645

(*Enter Alcmena.*)

*Alcmena*

What's wrong? What's causing all this noise that fills  
The house? Another Argive to assault  
You? Stranger, I warn you. I'm weak, God knows  
But I'll fight kidnappers till my last breath,  
Or Heracles was not his mother's son. 650  
If you so much as lay a hand upon  
These children, then you'll have the glory of  
Attacking two defenseless oldsters first.

*Iolaus*

Cheer up. There's nothing of the sort. This man  
Is not an Argive come to threaten us. 655

*Alcmena*

Then why cry out and give the sign of fright?

*Iolaus*

I only cried out to bring you out here.

*Alcmena*

That's quite another thing. Who is this man?

*Iolaus*

He's come to tell you that your grandson's here.

*Alcmena*

Your glad news makes you welcome, as he is. 660  
But if he *has* arrived, where is he now?  
What kept him from accompanying you  
And gladdening his old grandmother's heart?

*Attendant*

He's halted, and is drawing up his troops.

*Alcmene*

Well that, of course, is no concern of mine.

665

*Iolaus*

It is, though I'm the one to ask details.

*Attendant*

Well, just what is it that you want to know?

*Iolaus*

How many men did Hyllus bring with him?

*Attendant*

Plenty. I couldn't tell you more than that.

*Iolaus*

And Athens' leaders have been notified?

670

*Attendant*

Yes, and he's stationed to the left of them.

*Iolaus*

Why they must be about to start the fight?

*Attendant*

Yes, victims have been brought forth to be killed.

*Iolaus*

How far from your lines are the enemy?

*Attendant*

I saw the Argive king plain as could be.

675

*Iolaus*

Yes? What's he up to? Drawing up his men?

*Attendant*

Yes, I should think so, though I heard no news.

EURIPIDES

I'm off to my own chiefs; when action starts  
I don't intend to leave them in the lurch.

*Iolaus*

Well, wait for me! That's just the thing! I want  
To go and join my friends and help them out.

680

*Attendant*

Come now, don't talk such rot. It's not like you.

*Iolaus*

Not like me, is it, to fight for my friends?

*Attendant*

You'd do no good, unless your looks could kill.

*Iolaus*

What? I could smash a shield in just like that!

685

*Attendant*

You might, if you could keep from falling first.

*Iolaus*

There's not a one that will stand up to me.

*Attendant*

There, easy now; you're not the man you were.

*Iolaus*

I'll take on just as many as I did.

*Attendant*

Your help won't turn the tide in any case.

690

*Iolaus*

Don't keep me from a thing I'm set to do.

THE HERACLEIDAE

*Attendant*

To do? You mean to want it done, don't you?

*Iolaus*

Say what you please, but still I go along.

*Attendant*

But you're unarmed. How can you face a fight?

*Iolaus*

I'll use the captured arms which happen to  
Be hanging in the temple here. The god  
Will get them back if I survive; if not,  
He'll never dun me. Go and take them down.  
Quick! Bring the gear out here! A stay-at-home  
Is a disgrace, that's what he is. He keeps  
Out of harm's way and shakes, while others fight.

695  
700

(Exit Attendant.)

*Chorus*

The years have left your spirit just  
As fiery, in your faded body.  
But why must you try so hard to hurt yourself?  
It does *our* state no good, if you can't bring  
Yourself to act your age and not go off  
On useless tangents. No one  
Can bring you back your prime again.

705

*Alcmene*

What lunacy is this? Do you propose  
To leave me and the children here alone?

710

*Iolaus*

War is a man's job. Your work's minding these.

*Alcmene*

What's to become of me if you should die?



*Iolaus*

The grandsons who are left will tend you then.

*Alcmene*

Suppose worse comes to worst—my God!—for them?

*Iolaus*

These others will stand by you, never fear. 715

*Alcmene*

Then here I put my trust, my last resort.

*Iolaus*

I'm sure that Zeus is also on your side.

*Alcmene*

Hm!

It's not for me to criticize Zeus, but  
Still he knows best if he's played fair with me. 720

(*Re-enter Attendant.*)

*Attendant*

Here is a full and fitting battle outfit;  
Be quick and put it on. The fight's at hand.  
For above everything the God of Battles  
Detests a slacker. If the gear's too heavy,  
Go on without it. Once inside the ranks 725  
You can encase yourself; till then I'll carry it.

*Iolaus*

All right, come on; but keep my things all ready.  
Now put the spear-shaft into my left hand  
And take my right arm so, to guide my steps.

*Attendant*

Ye gods! Am I to nursemaid you to war? 730

*Iolaus*

No, but we'll watch our step. To fall's bad luck.

*Attendant*

If only you could do what you can dream.

*Iolaus*

Hurry! I can't afford to miss the fight.

*Attendant*

You are the dawdler, though you think it's I.

*Iolaus*

But don't you see how very fast I'm walking?

735

*Attendant*

I see the speed is largely in your mind.

*Iolaus*

You'll change your tune as soon as I get there.

*Attendant*

What will you do? I want to see you win.

*Iolaus*

You'll see me smash clean through somebody's shield.

*Attendant*

If ever we arrive there, which I doubt.

740

*Iolaus*

I wish, oh arm of mine, that you could help  
Me as you used to, when with Heracles  
I ravaged Sparta, in my youth and power.  
Then how we'd thrash this king, Eurystheus, now,  
Who hasn't got the pluck to face a fight.  
But fortune always will confer an aura  
Of worth, unworthily; and in this world  
The lucky person passes for a genius.

745

(*Exeunt:*)

# EURIPIDES

## *Chorus*

### STROPHE

We call earth and the all-night span  
 Owned by the moon, and on the sun,  
 The god that radiates to man, 750  
 To send the word down here. With one  
 Voice make the whole sky ring like mad  
 To Zeus's own throne, and all the way  
 Out to Athena with the glad  
 News. As for us, we say: 755  
 For Athens, home, and for the right  
 Of refugees, we mean to fight  
 With naked steel.

### ANTISTROPHE

A dreadful and appalling thing  
 It is, to think that such a great 760  
 Town like Mycenae, threatening,  
 Should store up spite against our state.  
 But we'd have thoroughly deserved  
 Our ample fill of shame and curses  
 If, with guest-rights unobserved, 765  
 We gave to Argos' tender mercies  
 Their fugitives. Our champion Zeus  
 Prizes us, nor will I reduce  
 The gods beneath ourselves.

### STROPHE

Mother of our state and Queen! 770  
 Defender and Mistress as well!  
 Smash the false attackers' spleen.  
 Send their serried spears to hell!  
 Our cause is good, and I refuse  
 To think that we deserve to lose 775  
 Our native city.

### ANTISTROPHE

We honor the abundant rite  
 Of yours, and when the month is done,

THE HERACLEIDAE

In sequent song the young and light  
Of foot can dance and chant, as one. 780  
While night brings to the windy hill  
The pulse of dance, and girls that fill  
The dark with reveling.

(Enter another Attendant.)

*Attendant*

Madam, the news I bring is short and sweet,  
Short in the telling, and yet sweet to hear. 785  
We've won and set up a memorial  
Hung with a full display of captured arms.

*Alcmene*

How wonderful! This lucky day has set  
You free for all time, since you bring such news.  
Yet I'm not free myself of one nightmare: 790  
Are all my near and dear ones still alive?

*Attendant*

Alive and well and heroes every one.

*Alcmene*

And is old Iolaus all right, too?

*Attendant*

Covered with glory, too, with heaven's help.

*Alcmene*

What? Has he something to his credit too? 795

*Attendant*

He's been changed back to a young man again.

*Alcmene*

Well, of all things! But, first of all, please tell  
Us how our soldiers won this victory.

*Attendant*

I'll give you the whole story here and now.

When we had drawn our own troops up and stood	800
Directly opposite the enemy,	
Hyllus dismounted from his chariot.	
Standing in no-man's land between the two,	
He called to Eurystheus, "What's the use	
Of hurting Athens, king? Why not expose	805
Just one man's life, instead of harming your	
Land too? I challenge you to fight it out	
With me alone. If you win, you can take	
The sons of Heracles, and if I do	
I'll win my family seat and honor back."	810
And all the army madly cheered the thought	
Of Hyllus' pluck and of their own relief.	
But not the audience nor sheer concern	
For his prestige as leader proved enough	
To shame the king there into showing fight.	815
He didn't dare. And that's the kind of man	
Who wants to capture Heracles' own sons.	
Then Hyllus took his place back in the ranks.	
And when the seers realized that there was	
No hope of ending matters with a duel,	820
They sacrificed at once, and let the blood	
Flow down the victims' throats, in augury.	
The chiefs got in their chariots; the rest	
Hid ribs with shield-ribs; Demophon cheered on	
His troops in language worthy of his birth.	825
"Athenians, this earth that bore and raised	
You all, needs you to fight for her today."	
Meantime, the other king implored his men	
Not to shame Argos' or Mycenae's name,	
Until the trumpet call came high and clear.	830
And then both sides closed in. The sound of all	
Those shields colliding came in one great crash,	
And shrieks and pandemonium broke loose.	
At first their spearmen proved too much for us	
And drove us back; then they gave ground again,	835
And it was touch and go. We buckled down	
To fighting at close quarters, hand to hand.	

# THE HERACLEIDAE

Men dropped all round as war-cries swept the field.  
 "Athens, come on." Then "Men of Argos, strike;  
 Don't let the enemy make fools of us." 840  
 And we had all that we could do, but with  
 Great trouble, in the end we broke their ranks.  
 Then Iolaus, seeing Hyllus rush  
 By him begged hard to be allowed to get  
 Up on a chariot. Once there, he took 845  
 The reins himself and set his course straight for  
 The Argive king. That much I saw myself.  
 I'll tell the rest as it was told to me.  
 Passing Pallene and Athena's hill  
 He saw Eurystheus' car, and so he prayed 850  
 To Zeus and Hebe, to get back his youth  
 For just a day, and take a full revenge.  
 Then came the most astounding thing of all!  
 Two stars shone on the yoke. They threw a dark  
 Cloud over the whole car, and people who 855  
 Should know say they were Hebe and your own  
 Great son. Then the haze lifted to disclose  
 A young fellow with husky biceps, and,  
 Like a true hero, Iolaus caught  
 The king's own chariot at Sciron's rocks. 860  
 He's brought that chief who used to be so high  
 And mighty back with him, a prisoner  
 Of war with hands tied up. The lesson of  
 The thing is very plain. Don't envy men  
 Because they seem to have a run of luck, 865  
 Since luck's a nine days' wonder. Wait their end.

## *Chorus*

Give thanks to Zeus, who fought for us. At last  
 A day on which our worries are removed.

## *Alcmene*

Hail Zeus! You took your time in helping me,  
 But I'm not less obliged to you for that. 870  
 And now I know my son is really with

E U R I P I D E S

The gods, although I had my doubts before.  
 Children, just think! You're safe from danger now!  
 Safe from the king, who's going to die like  
 A dog. You'll soon set eyes upon your own 875  
 Country and have the soil that's yours by right  
 Beneath your feet. At last you'll worship those  
 Gods of your fathers who were banned for you  
 While you were poor and homeless. Tell me, though,  
 Why didn't Iolaus kill the king? 880  
 What's back of it? To me there is no point  
 In being kind to captured enemies.

*Attendant*

But it was done for you, so you could see  
 Eurystheus in his glory, in our hands.  
 It was brute force that brought him in, and not 885  
 His own accord, since he'd no heart to see  
 Your face, or pay the price for what he'd done.  
 And now goodbye. Please don't forget what you  
 First said when I began, that you would set  
 Me free; since I should think it's best to keep 890  
 Faith in these things. *Noblesse oblige*, you know.

(*Exit Attendant.*)

*Chorus*

STROPHE

There's nothing like the flute's sound when  
 We dance and sing and eat our fill  
 And love in all its sweetness. Then  
 I feel too glad for words and thrill 895  
 To see the happy ending for  
 Those near my heart, in brief, to see  
 Poor devils had good luck in store  
 For themselves, thanks to Destiny  
 And Change and Time. 900

ANTISTROPHE

I hope we keep along the right  
 Road. Up to now we've paid the high

# THE HERACLEIDAE

Gods all their due; it takes a quite  
 Unbalanced person to deny  
 It in the face of all the facts, 905  
 And Zeus himself has verified  
 It very clearly in his acts  
 Today, in taking down the pride  
 Of callous brutes.

## STROPHE

Your son, Alcmena, never died. 910  
 He rules above, and never set  
 His foot in Hades, or inside  
 The crematory fire, but met  
 The wedding-god and fell in love  
 With Hebe, and the two were paid 915  
 The honors due to children of  
 Zeus. It was a marriage made  
 In heaven's gilded halls.

## ANTISTROPHE

How small a world it is. They say  
 That Pallas helped the father in 920  
 The nick of time, and now today  
 The children's lives have also been  
 Saved by the goddess' own town.  
 The pride of that tormentor who  
 Ill-used them so was taken down, 925  
 And we'll have nothing more to do  
 With ruthlessness and greed.

*(Enter Attendant with Guards bringing in  
 Eurystheus in chains.)*

*Attendant*

Madame, we're bringing in, as you can see,  
 Eurystheus, which must surprise you and  
 Was the last thing that *he* expected too. 930  
 He hadn't bargained for this capture at  
 Your hands, when he set out from home with such



A force, in his insufferable conceit,  
 To smash this state. But fate arranged affairs  
 Quite otherwise and turned the tables here. 935  
 Hyllus and Iolaus, who were at  
 Work raising a memorial to Zeus,  
 Told me to bring this man to you and make  
 You happy, since there's nothing like the sight  
 Of an old enemy down on his luck. 940

*Alcmene*

You brute! So God has punished you at last.  
 Come, turn this way! Or haven't you the nerve  
 To look your enemies straight in the eye?  
 By God, you'll take the orders that you used  
 To give us, if you really are the man 945  
 Who piled humiliations upon my  
 Poor son. You filthy scum! You made him go  
 To hell before he died; you sent him out  
 To kill off hydras, lions, not to speak  
 Of all the other horrors—it would take 950  
 Too long to tell it all. But as though this  
 Were not enough for you; you drove me and  
 The children out of temples throughout Greece  
 Where we had taken refuge, hounding old 955  
 People and babes in arms until you found  
 A country that was free and wouldn't scare.  
 And now you'll get what's coming to you, though  
 Killing is much too good for you. To pay  
 For what you've done would take a thousand deaths. 960

*Chorus*

Wait! You can't put a man to death like that.

*Attendant*

What was the use of capturing him then?

*Alcmene*

Show me a law against his being killed!

*Chorus*

But the authorities won't stand for it.

*Alcmene*

You mean they don't like killing enemies? 965

*Chorus*

Not prisoners of war, at any rate.

*Alcmene*

And Hyllus, too, agreed with that idea?

*Chorus*

Do you expect him to defy our laws?

*Alcmene*

Why, then, we should have killed the man at once.

*Chorus*

That's when the wrong was done, since he's survived. 970

*Alcmene*

Why, what's the difference? We'll correct it now.

*Chorus*

No one will lay a hand upon this man.

*Alcmene*

No one? Suppose I do. Or don't I count?

*Chorus*

There'll be a strong reaction if you do.

*Alcmene*

No one can say that I don't love this city, 975  
But just let someone try to take away  
This man from me, now I've got hold of him.  
Call me a reckless fool as often as

# EURIPIDES

You like, and say I don't behave the way  
A woman should. I'll kill him all the same. 980

## *Chorus*

We feel for you. God knows that you have cause  
Enough to hate this man so terribly.

## *Eurystheus*

Don't think I'm going to grovel to you or  
Show the white feather here and beg to save  
My skin. In any case, I didn't start 985  
This feud of my accord. I knew quite well  
That you're my cousin and that Heracles  
Was consequently my own flesh and blood.  
I couldn't help myself when heaven took  
A hand, and Hera saddled me with this 990  
Scourge in the first place. Once I had estranged  
Your son for good and knew the fight was on,  
I racked my brains to make things hard for him  
And sat up nights to think of ways to beat  
And finish off my enemies, and end 995  
The fear that never left me day and night.  
I didn't underrate your son and knew  
His caliber, to give the man his due  
For courage, though he was no friend of mine.  
But though he'd died, the others kept alive 1000  
The spite. I knew the feud was handed down.  
That's why I had to try so hard to get  
Them killed or exiled, and to plot and plan;  
Those tactics meant the only hope for me.  
And in my own place, you'd have beaten off 1005  
The snarling cubs left by the lion who  
Had hated you. Don't try to tell me that  
You'd let them stay at peace, in Argos too.  
You missed your chance to kill me at the time  
When I was willing, so by all Greek laws 1010  
My death pollutes the one who strikes me down.  
Athens has let me live and knows enough

To think of piety before revenge.  
 I rest my case. Remember I was not  
 Afraid to go, and I'll have blood for blood. 1015  
 I don't particularly want to die  
 Or mind it either, and that's how things stand.

*Chorus*

Take my advice, Alcmene. Let this man  
 Go, since that's what this city would prefer.

*Alcmene*

Suppose we kill him—but respect their words? 1020

*Chorus*

That's fine, but how would you bring that about?

*Alcmene*

It's simple. All you have to do is let me kill  
 And let friends call for the body. Far be it  
 For me to cheat this city of his corpse.  
 He'll settle his account with me first, though. 1025

*Eurystheus*

Go on, I won't complain. But since your state  
 Here wouldn't stoop to kill me, I'll tell you  
 Of an old oracle of Loxias which  
 Will help you some day more than you may think.  
 You'll bury me, just as it stipulates, 1030  
 Before Athena's own Pallenian shrine,  
 And as the guest of Athens' soil I'll guard  
 You and preserve you till the end of time.  
 But when these children's children march on you  
 In force, then I'll be their arch-enemy. 1035  
 That's their idea of thanks, and that's the kind  
 Of people that you saved. You'll ask why I  
 Ignored the god and came in the first place.  
 Because I trusted Hera more and thought  
 That she'd keep faith. Don't let this woman pour 1040.

E U R I P I D E S

Libations and blood-offerings on my tomb.  
But in revenge I'll spoil the homecoming  
Of these, and so my end will do two things  
At once; it helps you, and it will hurt these.

*Alcmene*

What are you waiting for, to put this man 1045  
Out of the way, since as you've heard, it makes  
Your city safe from us? He's pointed out  
Your wisest course, since your worst enemy  
Becomes your best friend, once he's underground.  
Take him away, and when you've killed him, throw 1050

*(To Guards.)*

Him to the dogs, to scotch his last hope that  
He can come back and exile me again.

*Chorus*

That's the solution. Take away this man.  
I want to make sure that our kings are cleared  
Of all responsibility in this. 1055

*(Exeunt.)*

# HIPPOLYTUS

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

DAVID GRENE



## INTRODUCTION TO HIPPOLYTUS

"If it is necessary that I say anything about a woman's excellence," says Pericles in the history of Thucydides, "I could sum it up in the words: great is her renown whose name is least upon the lips of men either for good or for ill." This has sometimes been taken as the general view of women in Athenian society of the fifth century B.C. However, we have only to look at the tragic stage to realize that the audience at least was immensely interested in women and in their place in human society. Aristophanes attacks Euripides as the author in whose plays the perverse, violent, or monstrous woman has a leading place, and he cites Medea, Sthenoboea, and Phaedra in support of the justice of his charge. As far as the importance of feminine roles goes, Euripides' two predecessors are as guilty as he is. Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Queen Atossa, Electra, Tecmessa, Antigone, and Deianeira are among the most crucial and carefully worked characters in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

But it is probably true that the Athenian audience noticed with special interest, either with delight or with repulsion, Euripides' gallery of bad women. Medea, Sthenoboea, and Phaedra are the three singled out by Aristophanes. Both Sthenoboea and Phaedra are examples of incestuous love; in the *Hippolytus*, Euripides apparently had to revise an early version of the play in which Phaedra makes her proposal of love direct to her stepson. In the second version the nurse was invented to act as a go-between, and Phaedra's conscious responsibility for the address to Hippolytus is left in doubt. But Phaedra's passion for Hippolytus is still the center of the piece. It is not necessary to debate whether, to the fifth-cent-



tury Greek, sexual relations between stepmother and stepson would be technically incestuous or not. It is enough that we can be sure that they involved an extreme violation of the trust and affection between father and son, and something worse than that, even if the evil cannot be exactly charted.

The play is framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue, each spoken by a goddess. When these goddesses are identified as Aphrodite and Artemis, it becomes all too easy to allegorize them and see the play as a conflict between Lust and Continence with Phaedra and Hippolytus as the appropriate human representatives. But if this view were correct, surely the point of issue would have to be a conflict where the moral really emerged, where, that is, it was dramatically stated with a fair chance of an outcome in either direction. Hippolytus should be tempted where an ordinary man might fall, and Phaedra yield to a passion which, if blameworthy, is comprehensible. Instead, the monstrousness of the relationship is the hinge on which everything turns. Phaedra, when rejected, must kill herself for shame. Theseus, when he learns of it, is ready to murder his son; Hippolytus, in his defense before his father, says that he is accused of a crime from which even an ordinarily unchaste man would shrink. The truth seems to be that Euripides used a story with an almost Homeric flavor, of rival goddesses and their favorites, to write of the absolute power of passion over the human animal. The more horrible the crime of which she is guilty, the more clear it is that Phaedra is being driven far out of her natural course. The perversity of Hippolytus' ostentatious purity—for so the Greeks certainly regarded it—is the cynical foil to Phaedra's guilty lust. She must fall in love with the one man who is a very monk for continence!

This is certainly the right way to see the play, but the explanation also shows some of the play's weaknesses. The author is deeply concerned with Phaedra—Aristophanes is quite right to see that she is the principal character—and much less with Hippolytus. Consequently, when Phaedra dies, only halfway through the play, Euripides is left to deal with a denouement in which he is only professionally interested, be-

## HIPPOLYTUS

cause he must properly tidy up the ends of the story. He does this somewhat mechanically and with a flavor of rhetorical commonplace in the argument between Hippolytus and his father. After the disappearance of Phaedra, he enjoyed himself, one feels, only in writing the messenger's speech, with its exciting account of the young man's death. But the figure of Phaedra and even the nurse's intervention—that dramatist's second thought—and the flimsy ambiguity of motive all remain with us to illustrate what is meant by the statement that Euripides marks the beginning of modern psychological tragedy.

The play was first performed in 428 B.C.

## CHARACTERS

*Theseus*

*Hippolytus, his son by the queen of the Amazons*

*Phaedra, Theseus' wife, stepmother to Hippolytus*

*A Servant*

*A Messenger*

*The Nurse*

*The Chorus of Palace women, natives of Troezen*

*A Chorus of huntsmen, in attendance on Hippolytus*

*The Goddess Aphrodite*

*The Goddess Artemis*

# HIPPOLYTUS

SCENE: *Troezen, in front of the house of Theseus.*

## PROLOGUE

*Aphrodite*

I am called the Goddess Cypris:

I am mighty among men and they honor me by many  
names.

All those that live and see the light of sun  
from Atlas' Pillars to the tide of Pontus  
are mine to rule.

5

Such as worship my power in all humility,  
I exalt in honor.

But those whose pride is stiff-necked against me  
I lay by the heels.

There is joy in the heart of a God also  
when honored by men.

Now I will quickly tell you the truth of this story.

Hippolytus, son of Theseus by the Amazon,  
pupil of holy Pittheus,  
alone among the folk of this land of Troezen has  
blasphemed me

10

counting me vilest of the Gods in Heaven.

He will none of the bed of love nor marriage,  
but honors Artemis, Zeus's daughter,  
counting her greatest of the Gods in Heaven.

15

He is with her continually, this Maiden Goddess, in the  
greenwood.

They hunt with hounds and clear the land of wild things,  
mortal with immortal in companionship.

I do not grudge him such privileges: why should I? 20

But for his sins against me

I shall punish Hippolytus this day.

I have no need to toil to win my end:

much of the task has been already done.

Once he came from Pittheus' house<sup>1</sup> to the country of  
Pandion

that he might see and be initiate in the holy mysteries. 25

Phaedra saw him

and her heart was filled with the longings of love.

This was my work.

So before ever she came to Troezen

close to the rock of Pallas in view of this land, 30

she dedicated a temple to Cypris.

For her love, too, dwelt in a foreign land.

Ages to come will call this temple after him,

the temple of the Goddess established here.

When Theseus left the land of Cecrops,

flying from the guilty stain of the murder of the

Pallantids, 35

condemning himself to a year's exile

1. "Pittheus' house": The historian Pausanias, relating the legend of Hippolytus, says: "King Theseus, when he married Phaedra, daughter of the king of Crete, was in a quandary what to do with Hippolytus, his son by his former mistress, Antiope the Amazon. He did not wish that after his own death Hippolytus should rule the children of his legitimate marriage, nor yet that Hippolytus should be ruled by them, for he loved him. So he sent the boy to be brought up by his grandfather Pittheus, who lived in Troezen and ruled there. Theseus hoped that when Pittheus died, Hippolytus might inherit the kingdom, and thus peace within the family be preserved, Hippolytus governing Troezen, and Phaedra's children holding sway in Athens." "Pandion's country" and "land of Cecrops" both signify Attica. Pandion and Cecrops were early legendary heroes of Attica.

# HIPPOLYTUS

he sailed with his wife to this land.  
 Phaedra groans in bitterness of heart  
 and the goads of love prick her cruelly,  
 and she is like to die.  
 But she breathes not a word of her secret and none of  
 the servants 40  
 know of the sickness that afflicts her.  
 But her love shall not remain thus aimless and unknown.  
 I will reveal the matter to Theseus and all shall come out.  
 Father shall slay son with curses—  
 this son that is hateful to me.  
 For once the Lord Poseidon, Ruler of the Sea,  
 granted this favor to Theseus 45  
 that three of his prayers to the God should find answer.  
 Renowned shall Phaedra be in her death, but none the less  
 die she must.  
 Her suffering does not weigh in the scale so much  
 that I should let my enemies go untouched  
 escaping payment of that retribution  
 that honor demands that I have. 50  
 Look, here is the son of Theseus, Hippolytus!  
 He has just left his hunting.  
 I must go away.  
 See the great crowd that throngs upon his heels  
 and shouts the praise of Artemis in hymns! 55  
 He does not know  
 that the doors of death are open for him,  
 that he is looking on his last sun.

## SCENE I

*(Enter Hippolytus, attended by friends and servants  
 carrying nets, hunting spears, etc.)*

*Hippolytus*

Follow me singing  
 the praises of Artemis,  
 Heavenly One, Child of Zeus,

Artemis!

We are the wards of your care. 60

*(The Chorus of huntsmen chant.)*

Hail, Holy and Gracious!

Hail, Daughter of Zeus!

Hail, Maiden Daughter of Zeus and Leto! 65

Dweller in the spacious sky!

Maid of the Mighty Father!

Maid of the Golden Glistening House!

Hail!

Maiden Goddess most beautiful of all the Heavenly Host

that lives in Olympus! 70

*(Hippolytus advances to the altar of Artemis and  
lays a garland on it, praying.)*

My Goddess Mistress, I bring you ready woven

this garland. It was I that plucked and wove it,

plucked it for you in your inviolate Meadow.

No shepherd dares to feed his flock within it: 75

no reaper plies a busy scythe within it:

only the bees in springtime haunt the inviolate Meadow.

Its gardener is the spirit Reverence who

refreshes it with water from the river.

Not those who by instruction have profited

to learn, but in whose very soul the seed

of Chastity toward all things alike

nature has deeply rooted, they alone

may gather flowers there! the wicked may not. 80

Loved mistress, here I offer you this coronal;

it is a true worshipper's hand that gives it you

to crown the golden glory of your hair.

With no man else I share this privilege

that I am with you and to your words

can answer words. True, I may only hear: 85

I may not see God face to face.

## HIPPOLYTUS

So may I turn the post set at life's end  
even as I began the race.

*Servant*

King—for I will not call you "Master," that belongs  
to the Gods only—will you take good advice?

*Hippolytus*

Certainly I will take good advice. I am not a fool.

90

*Servant*

In men's communities one rule holds good,  
do you know it, King?

*Hippolytus*

Not I. What is this rule?

*Servant*

Men hate the haughty of heart who will not be  
the friend of every man.

*Hippolytus*

And rightly too:

For haughty heart breeds arrogant demeanor.

*Servant*

And affability wins favor, then?

95

*Hippolytus*

Abundant favor. Aye, and profit, too,  
at little cost of trouble.

*Servant*

Do you think  
that it's the same among the Gods in Heaven?

*Hippolytus*

If we in our world and the Gods in theirs  
know the same usages—Yes.



*Servant*

Then, King, how comes it  
that for a holy Goddess you have not even  
a word of salutation?

*Hippolytus*

Which Goddess?  
Be careful, or you will find that tongue of yours  
may make a serious mistake. 100

*Servant*

This Goddess here  
who stands before your gates, the Goddess Cypris.

*Hippolytus*

I worship her—but from a long way off,  
for I am chaste.

*Servant*

Yet she's a holy Goddess,  
and fair is her renown throughout the world.

*Hippolytus*

Men make their choice: one man honors one God,  
and one another.

*Servant*

Well, good fortune guard you!  
if you have the mind you should have. 105

*Hippolytus*

God of nocturnal prowess is not my God.

*Servant*

The honors of the Gods you must not scant, my son.

*Hippolytus*

Go, men, into the house and look to supper.

# HIPPOLYTUS

A plentiful table is an excellent thing  
after the hunt. And you (*singling out two*) rub down my  
horses. 110

When I have eaten I shall exercise them.  
For your Cypris here—a long goodbye to her!

*(The old man is left standing alone on the stage.  
He prays before the statue of Aphrodite.)*

O Cypris Mistress, we must not imitate  
the young men when they have such thoughts as these.  
As fits a slave to speak, here at your image 115  
I bow and worship. You should grant forgiveness  
when one that has a young tempestuous heart  
speaks foolish words. Seem not to hear them.  
You should be wiser than mortals, being Gods. 120

*(Enter Chorus of women, servants in Phaedra's house.)*

*Chorus*

## STROPHE

There is a rock streaming with water,  
whose source, men say, is Ocean,  
and it pours from the heart of its stone a spring  
where pitchers may dip and be filled.  
My friend was there and in the river water 125  
she dipped and washed the royal purple robes,  
and spread them on the rock's warm back  
where the sunbeams played.  
It was from her I heard at first  
of the news of my mistress' sorrow. 130

## ANTISTROPHE

She lies on her bed within the house,  
within the house and fever wracks her  
and she hides her golden head in fine-spun robes.  
This is the third day 135  
she has eaten no bread

## EURIPIDES

and her body is pure and fasting.  
 For she would willingly bring her life to anchor  
 at the end of its voyage  
 the gloomy harbor of death. 140

### STROPHE

Is it Pan's frenzy that possesses you  
 or is Hecate's madness upon you, maid?  
 Can it be the holy Corybantes,  
 or the mighty Mother who rules the mountains?  
 Are you wasted in suffering thus, 145  
 for a sin against Dictynna, Queen of hunters?  
 Are you perhaps unhallowed, having offered  
 no sacrifice to her from taken victims?  
 For she goes through the waters of the Lake<sup>2</sup>  
 can travel on dry land beyond the sea,  
 the eddying salt sea. 150

### ANTISTROPHE

Can it be that some other woman's love,  
 a secret love that hides itself from you,  
 has beguiled your husband  
 the son of Erechtheus  
 our sovran lord, that prince of noble birth?  
 Or has some sailor from the shores of Crete 155  
 put in at this harbor hospitable to sailors,  
 bearing a message for our queen,  
 and so because he told her some calamity  
 her spirit is bound in chains of grief  
 and she lies on her bed in sorrow? 160

### EPODE

Unhappy is the compound of woman's nature;  
 the torturing misery of helplessness,

2. Limnae, the Lake, a district in Laconia, was the center of the worship of Artemis in the Peloponnese. From it she is sometimes called *limnaios*, or Lady of the Lake.

# HIPPOLYTUS

the helplessness of childbirth and its madness  
are linked to it for ever.

My body, too, has felt this thrill of pain, 165  
and I called on Artemis, Queen of the Bow;  
she has my reverence always  
as she goes in the company of the Gods.

But here is the old woman, the queen's nurse 170  
here at the door. She is bringing her mistress out.  
There is a gathering cloud upon her face.  
What is the matter? my soul is eager to know.  
What can have made the queen so pale?  
What can have wasted her body so? 175

## SCENE II

*(Enter the Nurse, supporting Phaedra.)*

*Nurse*

A weary thing is sickness and its pains!  
What must I do now?  
Here is light and air, the brightness of the sky.  
I have brought out the couch on which you tossed  
in fever—here clear of the house. 180  
Your every word has been to bring you out,  
but when you're here, you hurry in again.  
You find no constant pleasure anywhere  
for when your joy is upon you, suddenly  
you're foiled and cheated.  
There's no content for you in what you have  
for you're forever finding something dearer,  
some other thing—because you have it not. 185  
It's better to be sick than nurse the sick.  
Sickness is single trouble for the sufferer:  
but nursing means vexation of the mind,  
and hard work for the hands besides.  
The life of man entire is misery:  
he finds no resting place, no haven from calamity. 190  
But something other dearer still than life

the darkness hides and mist encompasses;  
 we are proved luckless lovers of this thing  
 that glitters in the underworld: no man  
 can tell us of the stuff of it, expounding 195  
 what is, and what is not: we know nothing of it.  
 Idly we drift, on idle stories carried.

*Phaedra (to the servants)*

Lift me up! Lift my head up! All the muscles  
 are slack and useless. Here, you, take my hands.  
 They're beautiful, my hands and arms! 200  
 Take away this hat! It is too heavy to wear.  
 Take it away! Let my hair fall free on my shoulders.

*Nurse*

Quiet, child, quiet! Do not so restlessly  
 keep tossing to and fro! It's easier  
 to bear an illness if you have some patience 205  
 and the spirit of good breeding.  
 We all must suffer sometimes: we are mortal.

*Phaedra*

O,  
 if I could only draw from the dewy spring  
 a draught of fresh spring water!  
 If I could only lie beneath the poplars, 210  
 in the tufted meadow and find my rest there!

*Nurse*

Child, why do you rave so? There are others here.  
 Cease tossing out these wild demented words  
 whose driver is madness.

*Phaedra*

Bring me to the mountains! I *will* go to the mountains! 215  
 Among the pine trees where the huntsmen's pack  
 trails spotted stags and hangs upon their heels.  
 God, how I long to set the hounds on, shouting!

# HIPPOLYTUS

And poise the Thessalian javelin drawing it back—  
 here where my fair hair hangs above the ear— 220  
 I would hold in my hand a spear with a steel point.

*Nurse*

What ails you, child? What is this love of hunting,  
 and you a lady! Draught of fresh spring water!  
 Here, beside the tower there is a sloping ridge 225  
 with springs enough to satisfy your thirst.

*Phaedra*

Artemis, mistress of the Salty Lake,  
 mistress of the ring echoing to the racers' hoofs,  
 if only I could gallop your level stretches, 230  
 and break Venetian colts!

*Nurse*

This is sheer madness,  
 that prompts such whirling, frenzied, senseless words.  
 Here at one moment you're afire with longing  
 to hunt wild beasts and you'd go to the hills,  
 and then again all your desire is horses,  
 horses on the sands beyond the reach of the breakers. 235  
 Indeed, it would need to be a mighty prophet  
 to tell which of the Gods mischievously  
 jerks you from your true course and thwarts your wits!

*Phaedra*

O, I am miserable! What is this I've done?  
 Where have I strayed from the highway of good sense? 240  
 I was mad. It was the madness sent from some God  
 that caused my fall.  
 I am unhappy, so unhappy! Nurse,  
 cover my face again. I am ashamed 245  
 of what I said. Cover me up. The tears  
 are flowing, and my face is turned to shame.  
 Rightness of judgment is bitterness to the heart.  
 Madness is terrible. It is better then  
 that I should die and know no more of anything.

*Nurse*

There, now, you are covered up. But my own body 250  
 when will death cover that? I have learned much  
 from my long life. The mixing bowl of friendship,  
 the love of one for the other, must be tempered.  
 Love must not touch the marrow of the soul. 255  
 Our affections must be breakable chains that we  
 can cast them off or tighten them.  
 That one soul so for two should be in travail  
 as I for her, that is a heavy burden. 260  
 The ways of life that are most fanatical  
 trip us up more, they say, than bring us joy.  
 They're enemies to health. So I praise less  
 the extreme than temperance in everything. 265  
 The wise will bear me out.

*Chorus Leader*

Old woman, you are Phaedra's faithful nurse.  
 We can see that she is in trouble but the cause  
 that ails her is black mystery to us.  
 We would like to hear you tell us what is the matter. 270

*Nurse*

I have asked and know no more. She will not tell me.

*Chorus Leader*

Not even what began it?

*Nurse*

And my answer  
 is still the same: of all this she will not speak.

*Chorus Leader*

But see how ill she is, and how her body  
 is wracked and wasted!

*Nurse*

Yes, she has eaten nothing  
 for two days now.

275

# HIPPOLYTUS

*Chorus Leader*

Is this the scourge of madness?  
Or can it be . . . that death is what she seeks?

*Nurse*

Aye, death. She is starving herself to death.

*Chorus Leader*

I wonder that her husband suffers this.

*Nurse*

She hides her troubles, swears that she isn't sick.

*Chorus Leader*

But does he not look into her face and see . . . 280  
a witness that disproves her?

*Nurse*

No, he is gone.  
He is away from home, in foreign lands.

*Chorus Leader*

Why, you must force her then to find the cause  
of this mind-wandering sickness!

*Nurse*

Every means  
I have tried and still have won no foot of ground.  
But I'll not give up trying, even now. 285  
You are here and can in person bear me witness  
that I am loyal to my masters always,  
even in misfortune's hour.  
Dear child, let us both forget our former words.  
Be kinder, you: unknit that ugly frown.  
For my part I will leave this track of thought: 290  
I cannot understand you there. I'll take  
another and a better argument.

If you are sick and it is some secret sickness,  
here are women standing at your side to help.



But if your troubles may be told to men, 295  
 speak, that a doctor may pronounce upon it.  
 So, not a word! Oh, why will you not speak?  
 There is no remedy in silence, child.  
 Either I am wrong and then you should correct me:  
 or right, and you should yield to what I say.  
 Say something! Look at me! 300

Women, I have tried and tried and all for nothing.  
 We are as far as ever from our goal.  
 It was the same before. She was not melted  
 by anything I said. She would not obey me.

But this you shall know, though to my reasoning  
 you are more dumbly obstinate than the sea:  
 If you die, you will be a traitor to your children. 305  
 They will never know their share in a father's palace.  
 No, by the Amazon Queen, the mighty rider  
 who bore a master for your children, one  
 bastard in birth but true-born son in mind,  
 you know him well—Hippolytus. . . .  
 So that has touched you? 310

*Phaedra*

You have killed me, nurse. For God's sake, I entreat you,  
 never again speak that man's name to me.

*Nurse*

You see? You have come to your senses, yet despite that,  
 you will not make your children happy nor  
 save your own life besides.

*Phaedra*

I love my children.  
 It is another storm of fate that batters me. 315

*Nurse*

There is no stain of blood upon your hands?

HIPPOLYTUS

*Phaedra*

My hands are clean: the stain is in my heart.

*Nurse*

The hurt comes from outside? Some enemy?

*Phaedra*

One I love destroys me. Neither of us wills it.

*Nurse*

Has Theseus sinned a sin against you then?

320

*Phaedra*

God keep me equally guiltless in his sight!

*Nurse*

What is this terror urging you to death?

*Phaedra*

Leave me to my sins. My sins are not against you.

*Nurse*

Not of my will, but yours, you cast me off.

*Phaedra*

Would you force confession, my hand-clasping suppliant?

325

*Nurse*

Your knees too—and my hands will never free you.

*Phaedra*

Sorrow, nurse, sorrow, you will find my secret.

*Nurse*

Can I know greater sorrow than losing you?

*Phaedra*

You will kill me. My honor lies in silence.

*Nurse*

And then you will hide this honor, though I beseech you?

330

*Phaedra*

Yes, for I seek to win good out of shame.

*Nurse*

Where honor is, speech will make you more honorable.

*Phaedra*

O God, let go my hand and go away!

*Nurse*

No, for you have not given me what you should.

*Phaedra*

I yield. Your suppliant hand compels my reverence. 335

*Nurse*

I will say no more. Yours is the word from now.

*Phaedra*

Unhappy mother, what a love was yours!

*Nurse*

It is her love for the bull you mean, dear child?

*Phaedra*

Unhappy sister, bride of Dionysus!

*Nurse*

Why these ill-boding words about your kin? 340

*Phaedra*

And I the unlucky third, see how I end!

*Nurse*

Your words are wounds. Where will your tale conclude?

*Phaedra*

Mine is an inherited curse. It is not new.

*Nurse*

I have not yet heard what I most want to know.

*Phaedra*

If you could say for me what I must say for myself. 345

*Nurse*

I am no prophet to know your hidden secrets.

*Phaedra*

What is this thing, this love, of which they speak?

*Nurse*

Sweetest and bitterest, both in one, at once.

*Phaedra*

One of the two, the bitterness, I've known.

*Nurse*

Are you in love, my child? And who is he? 350

*Phaedra*

There is a man, . . . his mother was an Amazon. . . .

*Nurse*

You mean Hippolytus?

*Phaedra*

You  
have spoken it, not I.

*Nurse*

What do you mean? This is my death.  
Women, this is past bearing. I'll not bear  
life after this. A curse upon the daylight!  
A curse upon this shining sun above us! 355  
I'll throw myself from a cliff, throw myself headlong!  
I'll be rid of life somehow, I'll die somehow!  
Farewell to all of you! This is the end for me.

The chaste, they love not vice of their own will,  
but yet they love it. Cypris, you are no God.

You are something stronger than God if that can be. 360  
 You have ruined her and me and all this house.

(*The Nurse goes off. The Chorus forms into  
 two half-choruses.*)

*First Half-chorus*

Did you hear, did you hear  
 the queen crying aloud,  
 telling of a calamity  
 which no ear should hear?

*Second Half-chorus*

I would rather die  
 than think such thoughts as hers. 365

*First Half-chorus*

I am sorry for her trouble.

*Second Half-chorus*

Alas for troubles, man-besetting.

*First Half-chorus (turning to Phaedra)*

You are dead, you yourself  
 have dragged your ruin to the light.  
 What can happen now in the long  
 dragging stretch of the rest of your days?  
 Some new thing will befall the house. 370

*Chorus (united)*

We know now, we know now  
 how your love will end,  
 poor unhappy Cretan girl!

*Phaedra*

Hear me, you women of Troezen who live  
 in this extremity of land, this anteroom to Argos.  
 Many a time in night's long empty spaces 375

# HIPPOLYTUS

I have pondered on the causes of a life's shipwreck.  
 I think that our lives are worse than the mind's quality  
 would warrant. There are many who know virtue.  
 We know the good, we apprehend it clearly. 380  
 But we can't bring it to achievement. Some  
 are betrayed by their own laziness, and others  
 value some other pleasure above virtue.  
 There are many pleasures in a woman's life—  
 long gossiping talks and leisure, that sweet curse.  
 Then there is shame that thwarts us. Shame is of two  
 kinds. 385  
 The one is harmless, but the other a plague.  
 For clarity's sake, we should not talk of "shame,"  
 a single word for two quite different things.  
 These then are my thoughts. Nothing can now seduce me 390  
 to the opposite opinion. I will tell you  
 in my own case the track which my mind followed.  
 At first when love had struck me, I reflected  
 how best to bear it. Silence was my first plan.  
 Silence and concealment. For the tongue  
 is not to be trusted: it can criticize 395  
 another's faults, but on its own possessor  
 it brings a thousand troubles.  
 Then I believed that I could conquer love,  
 conquer it with discretion and good sense.  
 And when that too failed me, I resolved to die. 400  
 And death is the best plan of them all. Let none of you  
 dispute that.  
 It would always be my choice  
 to have my virtues known and honored. So  
 when I do wrong I could not endure to see  
 a circle of condemning witnesses.  
 I know what I have done: I know the scandal: 405  
 and all too well I know that I am a woman,  
 object of hate to all. Destruction light  
 upon the wife who herself plays the tempter  
 and strains her loyalty to her husband's bed  
 by dalliance with strangers. In the wives 410

of noble houses first this taint begins:  
 when wickedness approves itself to those  
 of noble birth, it will surely be approved  
 by their inferiors. Truly, too, I hate  
 lip-worshippers of chastity who own  
 a lecherous daring when they have privacy.  
 O Cypris, Sea-Born Goddess, how can they 415  
 look frankly in the faces of their husbands  
 and never shiver with fear lest their accomplice,  
 the darkness, and the rafters of the house  
 take voice and cry aloud?

This then, my friends, is my destruction:  
 I cannot bear that I should be discovered 420  
 a traitor to my husband and my children.  
 God grant them rich and glorious life in Athens—  
 famous Athens—freedom in word and deed,  
 and from their mother an honorable name.  
 It makes the stoutest-hearted man a slave  
 if in his soul he knows his parents' shame. 425

The proverb runs: "There is one thing alone  
 that stands the brunt of life throughout its course,  
 a quiet conscience," . . . a just and quiet conscience  
 whoever can attain it.

Time holds a mirror, as for a young girl,  
 and sometimes as occasion falls, he shows us  
 the ugly rogues of the world. I would not wish  
 that I should be seen among them. 430

*Chorus Leader*

How virtue is held lovely everywhere,  
 and harvests a good name among mankind!

(*The Nurse returns.*)

*Nurse*

Mistress, the trouble you have lately told me,  
 coming on me so suddenly, frightened me;  
 but now I realize that I was foolish. 435

# HIPPOLYTUS

In this world second thoughts, it seems, are best.  
Your case is not so extraordinary,  
beyond thought or reason. The Goddess in her anger  
has smitten you, and you are in love. What wonder  
is this? There are many thousands suffer with you.

So, you will die for love! And all the others, 440  
who love, and who will love, must they die, too?  
How will that profit them? The tide of love,  
at its full surge, is not withstandable.

Upon the yielding spirit she comes gently,  
but to the proud and the fanatic heart 445  
she is a torturer with the brand of shame.

She wings her way through the air; she is in the sea,  
in its foaming billows; from her everything,  
that is, is born. For she engenders us  
and sows the seed of desire whereof we're born, 450  
all we her children, living on the earth.

He who has read the writings of the ancients  
and has lived much in books, he knows  
that Zeus once loved the lovely Semele;  
he knows that Dawn, the bright light of the world,  
once ravished Cephalus hence to the God's company 455  
for love's sake. Yet all these dwell in heaven.

They are content, I am sure, to be subdued  
by the stroke of love.

But you, you won't submit! Why, you should certainly  
have had your father beget you on fixed terms 460  
or with other Gods for masters, if you don't like  
the laws that rule this world. Tell me, how many  
of the wise ones of the earth do you suppose  
see with averted eyes their wives turned faithless;  
how many erring sons have fathers helped  
with secret loves? It is the wise man's part 465  
to leave in darkness everything that is ugly.

We should not in the conduct of our lives  
be too exacting. Look, see this roof here—  
these overarching beams that span your house—



could builders with all their skill lay them dead straight?  
 You've fallen into the great sea of love  
 and with your puny swimming would escape! 470  
 If in the sum you have more good luck than ill,  
 count yourself fortunate—for you are mortal.

Come, dear, give up your discontented mood.  
 Give up your railing. It's only insolent pride  
 to wish to be superior to the Gods. 475  
 Endure your love. The Gods have willed it so.  
 You are sick. Then try to find some subtle means  
 to turn your sickness into health again.  
 There are magic love charms, spells of enchantment;  
 we'll find some remedy for your love-sickness.  
 Men would take long to hunt devices out, 480  
 if we the women did not find them first.

*Chorus Leader*

Phaedra, indeed she speaks more usefully  
 for today's troubles. But it is you I praise.  
 And yet my praise brings with it more discomfort  
 than her words: it is bitterer to the ear. 485

*Phaedra*

This is the deadly thing which devastates  
 well-ordered cities and the homes of men—  
 that's it, this art of oversubtle words.  
 It's not the words ringing delight in the ear  
 that one should speak, but those that have the power  
 to save their hearer's honorable name.

*Nurse*

This is high moralizing! What you want 490  
 is not fine words, but the man! Come, let's be done.  
 And tell your story frankly and directly.  
 For if there were no danger to your life,  
 as now there is—or if you could be prudent,  
 I never would have led you on so far, 495

# HIPPOLYTUS

merely to please your fancy or your lust.  
But now a great prize hangs on our endeavors,  
and that's the saving of a life—yours, Phaedra,  
there's none can blame us for our actions now.

*Phaedra*

What you say is wicked, wicked! Hold your tongue!  
I will not hear such shameful words again.

*Nurse*

O, they are shameful! But they are better than 500  
your noble-sounding moral sentiments.  
"The deed" is better if it saves your life:  
than your "good name" in which you die exulting.

*Phaedra*

For God's sake, do not press me any further!  
What you say is true, but terrible!  
My very soul is subdued by my love  
and if you plead the cause of wrong so well 505  
I shall fall into the abyss  
from which I now am flying.

*Nurse*

If that is what you think, you should be virtuous.  
But if you are not, obey me: that is next best.  
It has just come to my mind, I have at home 510  
some magic love charms. They will end your trouble;  
they'll neither harm your honor nor your mind.  
They'll end your trouble, . . . only you must be brave. 515

*Phaedra*

Is this a poison ointment or a drink?

*Nurse*

I don't know. Don't be overanxious, child,  
to find out what it is. Accept its benefits.

*Phaedra*

I am afraid of you: I am afraid  
that you will be too clever for my good.

*Nurse*

You are afraid of everything. What is it?

*Phaedra*

You surely will not tell this to Hippolytus? 520

*Nurse*

Come, let that be: I will arrange all well.  
Only, my lady Cypris of the Sea,  
be my helper you. The other plans I have  
I'll tell to those we love within the house;  
that will suffice.

(*The Nurse goes off.*)

*Chorus*

STROPHE

Love distills desire upon the eyes, 525  
love brings bewitching grace into the heart  
of those he would destroy.  
I pray that love may never come to me  
with murderous intent,  
in rhythms measureless and wild.  
Not fire nor stars have stronger bolts 530  
than those of Aphrodite sent  
by the hand of Eros, Zeus's child.

ANTISTROPHE

In vain by Alpheus' stream, 535  
in vain in the halls of Phoebus' Pythian shrine  
the land of Greece increases sacrifice.  
But Love the King of Men they honor not, 540  
although he keeps the keys  
of the temple of desire,  
although he goes destroying through the world,

## HIPPOLYTUS

author of dread calamities  
and ruin when he enters human hearts.

### STROPHE

The Oechalian maiden who had never known 545  
the bed of love, known neither man nor marriage,  
the Goddess Cypris gave to Heracles.  
She took her from the home of Eurytus,  
maiden unhappy in her marriage song,  
wild as a Naiad or a Bacchanal, 550  
with blood and fire, a murderous hymenaeal!

### ANTISTROPHE

O holy walls of Thebes and Dirce's fountain 555  
bear witness you, to Love's grim journeying:  
once you saw Love bring Semele to bed,  
lull her to sleep, clasped in the arms of Death,  
pregnant with Dionysus by the thunder king. 560  
Love is like a flitting bee in the world's garden  
and for its flowers, destruction is in his breath.

### SCENE III

*(Phaedra is standing listening near the central door  
of the palace.)*

*Phaedra*

Women, be silent!

*(She listens and then recoils.)*

Oh, I am destroyed forever. 565

*Chorus Leader*

What is there terrible within the house?

*Phaedra*

Hush, let me hear the voices within!

*Chorus Leader*

And I obey. But this is sorrow's prelude.

*Phaedra (cries out)*

Oh, I am the most miserable of women! 570

*(The Chorus Leader and the Chorus babble  
excitedly among themselves.)*

What does she mean by her cries?

Why does she scream?

Tell us the fear-winged word, Mistress, the fear-winged  
word,  
rushing upon the heart.

*Phaedra*

I am lost. Go, women, stand and listen there yourselves 575  
and hear the tumult that falls on the house.

*Chorus Leader*

Mistress, you stand at the door.

It is you who can tell us best  
what happens within the house. 580

*Phaedra*

Only the son of the horse-loving Amazon,  
Hippolytus, cursing a servant maid.

*Chorus Leader*

My ears can catch a sound, 585  
but I can hear nothing clear.

I can only hear a voice  
scolding in anger.

*Phaedra*

It is plain enough. He cries aloud against  
the mischievous bawd who betrays her mistress' love. 590

*Chorus Leader*

Lady, you are betrayed!

How can I help you?

What is hidden is revealed.

You are destroyed.  
Those you love have betrayed you. 595

*Phaedra*

She loved me and she told him of my troubles,  
and so has ruined me. She was my doctor,  
but her cure has made my illness mortal now.

*Chorus Leader*

What will you do? There is no cure.

*Phaedra*

I know of one, and only one—quick death.  
That is the only cure for my disease. 600

*(She retires into the palace through one of the side doors just as Hippolytus issues through the central door, dogged by the Nurse. Phaedra is conceived of as listening from behind her door during the entire conversation between the Nurse and Hippolytus.)*

*Hippolytus*

O Mother Earth! O Sun and open sky!  
What words I have heard from this accursed tongue!

*Nurse*

Hush, son! Someone may hear you.

*Hippolytus*

You cannot  
expect that I hear horror and stay silent.

*Nurse*

I beg of you, entreat you by your right hand,  
your strong right hand, . . . don't speak of this! 605

*Hippolytus*

Don't lay your hand on me! Let go my cloak!

*Nurse*

By your knees then, . . . don't destroy me!

*Hippolytus*

What is this?

Don't you declare that you have done nothing wrong?

*Nurse*

Yes, but the story, son, is not for everyone.

*Hippolytus*

Why not? A pleasant tale makes pleasanter telling,  
when there are many listeners.

610

*Nurse*

You will not break your oath to me, surely you will not?

*Hippolytus*

My tongue swore, but my mind was still unpledged.

*Nurse*

Son, what would you do?

You'll not destroy your friends?

*Hippolytus*

"Friends" you say!

I spit the word away. None of the wicked  
are friends of mine.

*Nurse*

Then pardon, son. It's natural  
that we should sin, being human.

615

*Hippolytus*

Women! This coin which men find counterfeit!  
Why, why, Lord Zeus, did you put them in the world,

# HIPPOLYTUS

in the light of the sun? If you were so determined  
 to breed the race of man, the source of it  
 should not have been women. Men might have dedicated  
 in your own temples images of gold, 620  
 silver, or weight of bronze, and thus have bought  
 the seed of progeny, . . . to each been given  
 his worth in sons according to the assessment  
 of his gift's value. So we might have lived  
 in houses free of the taint of women's presence.  
 But now, to bring this plague into our homes 625  
 we drain the fortunes of our homes. In this  
 we have a proof how great a curse is woman.  
 For the father who begets her, rears her up,  
 must add a dowry gift to pack her off  
 to another's house and thus be rid of the load.  
 And he again that takes the cursed creature 630  
 rejoices and enriches his heart's jewel  
 with dear adornment, beauty heaped on vileness.  
 With lovely clothes the poor wretch tricks her out  
 spending the wealth that underprops his house. 635  
 That husband has the easiest life whose wife  
 is a mere nothingness, a simple fool,  
 uselessly sitting by the fireside.  
 I hate a clever woman—God forbid 640  
 that I should ever have a wife at home  
 with more than woman's wits! Lust breeds mischief  
 in the clever ones. The limits of their minds  
 deny the stupid lecherous delights.  
 We should not suffer servants to approach them, 645  
 but give them as companions voiceless beasts,  
 dumb, . . . but with teeth, that they might not converse,  
 and hear another voice in answer.  
 But now at home the mistress plots the mischief,  
 and the maid carries it abroad. So you, vile woman, 650  
 came here to me to bargain and to traffic  
 in the sanctity of my father's marriage bed.  
 I'll go to a running stream and pour its waters  
 into my ear to purge away the filth.



Shall I who cannot even hear such impurity,  
and feel myself untouched, . . . shall I turn sinner? 655

Woman, know this. It is my piety saves you.

Had you not caught me off my guard and bound  
my lips with an oath, by heaven I would not refrain  
from telling this to my father.

Now I will go and leave this house until

Theseus returns from his foreign wanderings,  
and I'll be silent. But I'll watch you close. 660

I'll walk with my father step by step and see  
how you look at him, . . . you and your mistress both.

I have tasted of the daring of your infamy.

I'll know it for the future. Curses on you!

I'll hate you women, hate and hate and hate you,  
and never have enough of hating. . . .

Some

say that I talk of this eternally,  
yes, but eternal, too, is woman's wickedness. 665

Either let someone teach them to be chaste,  
or suffer me to trample on them forever.

*(Phaedra comes out from behind the door.*

*Exit Hippolytus.)*

*Phaedra*

Bitter indeed is woman's destiny!

I have failed. What trick is there now, what cunning plea 670  
to loose the knot around my neck?

I have had justice. O earth and the sunlight!

Where shall I escape from my fate?

How shall I hide my trouble?

What God or man would appear

to bear hand or part in my crime? 675

There is a limit to all suffering and I have reached it.

I am the unhappiest of women.

*Chorus*

Alas, mistress, all is over now 680

your servant's schemes have failed and you are ruined.

# HIPPOLYTUS

(Enter the Nurse.)

*Phaedra*

This is fine service you have rendered me,  
corrupted, damned seducer of your friends!  
May Zeus, the father of my fathers' line,  
blot you out utterly, raze you from the world  
with thunderbolts! Did I not see your purpose, 685  
did I not say to you, "Breathe not a word of this"  
which now overwhelms me with shame? But you,  
you did not hold back. And therefore I must die  
and die dishonored.

Enough of this. We have a new theme now.  
The anger of Hippolytus is whetted.  
He will tell his father all the story of your sin 690  
to my disparagement. He will tell old Pittheus, too.  
He will fill all the land with my dishonor.  
May my curse  
light upon you, on you and all the others  
who eagerly help unwilling friends to ruin.

*Nurse*

Mistress, you may well blame my ill-success, 695  
for sorrow's bite is master of your judgment.  
But I have an answer to make if you will listen.  
I reared you up. I am your loyal servant.  
I sought a remedy for your love's sickness,  
and found, . . . not what I sought.  
Had I succeeded, I had been a wise one. 700  
Our wisdom varies in proportion to  
our failure or achievement.

*Phaedra*

So, that's enough  
for me? Do I have justice if you deal me  
my death blow and then say "I was wrong: I grant it."

*Nurse*

We talk too long. True I was not wise then.

But even from this desperate plight, my child, 705  
you can escape.

*Phaedra*

You, speak no more to me.  
You have given me dishonorable advice.  
What you have tried has brought dishonor too.  
Away with you!  
Think of yourself. For me and my concerns  
I will arrange all well.  
(Exit Nurse.)

You noble ladies of Troezen, grant me this, 710  
this one request, that what you have heard here  
you wrap in silence.

*Chorus Leader*

I swear by holy Artemis, child of Zeus,  
never to bring your troubles to the daylight.

*Phaedra*

I thank you. I have found one single blessing 715  
in this unhappy business, one alone,  
that I can pass on to my children after me  
life with an uncontaminated name,  
and myself profit by the present throw  
of Fortune's dice. For I will never shame you,  
my Cretan home, nor will I go to face 720  
Theseus, defendant on an ugly charge,  
never—for one life's sake.

*Chorus Leader*

What is the desperate deed you mean to do,  
the deed past cure?

*Phaedra*

Death. But the way of it, that  
is what I now must plan.

# HIPPOLYTUS

*Chorus Leader*

Oh, do not speak of it!

*Phaedra*

No, I'll not speak of it. But on this day  
 when I shake off the burden of this life 725  
 I shall delight the Goddess who destroys me,  
 the Goddess Cypris.  
 Bitter will have been the love that conquers me,  
 but in my death I shall at least bring sorrow,  
 upon another, too, that his high heart  
 may know no arrogant joy at my life's shipwreck;  
 he will have his share in this my mortal sickness 730  
 and learn of chastity in moderation.

*Chorus*

## STROPHE

Would that I were under the cliffs, in the secret hiding-  
 places of the rocks,  
 that Zeus might change me to a winged bird  
 and set me among the feathered flocks.  
 I would rise and fly to where the sea 735  
 washes the Adriatic coast,  
 and to the waters of Eridanus.  
 Into that deep-blue tide,  
 where their father, the Sun, goes down,  
 the unhappy maidens weep  
 tears from their amber-gleaming eyes 740  
 in pity for Phaethon.

## ANTISTROPHE

I would win my way to the coast,  
 apple-bearing Hesperian coast,  
 of which the minstrels sing.  
 Where the Lord of the Ocean  
 denies the voyager further sailing, 745  
 and fixes the solemn limit of Heaven  
 which Giant Atlas upholds.

There the streams flow with ambrosia  
by Zeus's bed of love,  
and holy earth, the giver of life, 750  
yields to the Gods rich blessedness.

STROPHE

O Cretan ship with the white sails,  
from a happy home you brought her,  
my mistress over the tossing foam, over the salty sea, 755  
to bless her with a marriage unblest.  
Black was the omen that sped her here,  
black was the omen for both her lands,  
for glorious Athens and her Cretan home,  
as they bound to Munychia's pier 760  
the cables' ends with their twisted strands  
and stepped ashore on the continent.

ANTISTROPHE

The presage of the omen was true; 765  
Aphrodite has broken her spirit  
with the terrible sickness of impious love.  
The waves of destruction are over her head,  
from the roof of her room with its marriage bed,  
she is tying the twisted noose. 770  
And now it is around her fair white neck!  
The shame of her cruel fate has conquered.  
She has chosen good name rather than life:  
she is easing her heart of its bitter load of love. 775

*Nurse (within)*

Ho, there, help!  
You who are near the palace, help!  
My mistress, Theseus' wife, has hanged herself.

*Chorus Leader*

It is done, she is hanged in the dangling rope.  
Our Queen is dead.

# HIPPOLYTUS

*Nurse (within)*

Quick! Someone bring a knife!  
Help me cut the knot around her neck. 780

*(The Chorus talks among itself.)*

*First Woman*

What shall we do, friends? Shall we cross the threshold,  
and take the Queen from the grip of the tight-drawn  
cords?

*Second Woman*

Why should we? There are servants enough within  
for that. Where hands are overbusy,  
there is no safety. 785

*Nurse (within)*

Lay her out straight, poor lady.  
Bitter shall my lord find her housekeeping.

*Third Woman*

From what I hear, the queen is dead.  
They are already laying out the corpse.

## SCENE IV

*(Theseus enters.)*

*Theseus*

Women, what is this crying in the house? 790  
I heard heavy wailing on the wind,  
as it were servants, mourning. And my house  
deigns me no kindly welcome, though I come  
crowned with good luck from Delphi.  
The doors are shut against me. Can it be  
something has happened to my father. He is old. 795  
His life has traveled a great journey,  
but bitter would be his passing from our house.

*Chorus Leader*

King, it is not the old who claim your sorrow.  
Young is the dead and bitterly you'll grieve.

*Theseus*

My children . . . has death snatched a life away?

*Chorus Leader*

Your children live—but sorrowfully, King.  
Their mother is dead.

800

*Theseus*

It cannot be true, it cannot.  
My wife! How could she be dead?

*Chorus Leader*

She herself tied the rope around her neck.

*Theseus*

Was it grief and numbing loneliness drove her to it,  
or has there been some violence at work?

*Chorus Leader*

I know no more than this. I, too, came lately  
to mourn for you and yours, King Theseus.

805

*Theseus*

Oh,  
Why did I plait this coronal of leaves,  
and crown my head with garlands, I the envoy  
who find my journey end in misery.

*(To the servants within.)*

Open the doors! Unbar the fastenings,  
that I may see this bitter sight, my wife  
who killed me in her own death.

810

*(The doors are opened, and Theseus goes inside.  
The Chorus in the Orchestra divide again  
into half-choruses and chant.)*

*First Half-chorus*

Woman unhappy, tortured,

HIPPOLYTUS

your suffering, your death,  
has shaken this house to its foundations.

*Second Half-chorus*

You were daring, you who died  
in violence and guilt.  
Here was a wrestling: your own hand against your life. 815

*Chorus (united)*

Who can have cast a shadow on your life?

SCENE V

(*Enter Theseus.*)

*Theseus*

O city, city! Bitterness of sorrow!  
Extremest sorrow that a man can suffer!  
Fate, you have ground me and my house to dust,  
fate in the form of some ineffable  
pollution, some grim spirit of revenge. 820  
The file has whittled away my life until  
it is a life no more.  
I am like a swimmer that falls into a great sea:  
I cannot cross this towering wave I see before me. 825

My wife! I cannot think  
of anything said or done to drive you to this horrible  
death.  
You are like a bird that has vanished out of my hand.  
You have made a quick leap out of my arms  
into the land of Death.  
It must be the sin of some of my ancestors in the dim  
past 830  
God in his vengeance makes me pay now.

*Chorus Leader*

You are not the only one, King.  
Many another as well as you  
has lost a noble wife. 835



*Theseus*

Darkness beneath the earth, darkness beneath the earth!  
 How good to lie there and be dead,  
 now that I have lost you, my dearest comrade.  
 Your death is no less mine. 840  
 Will any of you  
 tell me what happened?  
 Or does the palace keep a flock of you for nothing?

God, the pain I saw in the house!  
 I cannot speak of it, I cannot bear it. 845  
 I cannot speak of it, I cannot bear it. I am a dead man.  
 My house is empty and my children orphaned.  
 You have left them, you  
 my loving wife—  
 the best of wives 850  
 of all the sun looks down on or the blazing stars of the  
 night.

*Chorus*

Woe for the house! Such storms of ill assail it.  
 My eyes are wells of tears and overrun,  
 and still I fear the evil that shall come. 855

*Theseus*

Let her be, let her be:  
 What is this tablet fastened to her dear hand?  
 What can she wish to tell me of news?  
 Have you written begging me to care  
 for our children of, in entreaty,  
 about another woman? Sad one, rest confident. 860  
 There is no woman in the world who shall come to this  
 house  
 and sleep by my side.  
 Look, the familiar signet ring,  
 hers who was once my wife!  
 Come, I will break the seals,  
 and see what this letter has to tell me. 865

HIPPOLYTUS

*(The Chorus of women speak singly.)*

*First Woman*

Surely some God  
brings sorrow upon sorrow in succession.

*Second Woman*

The house of our lords is destroyed: it is no more. 870

*Third Woman*

God, if it so may be, hear my prayer.  
Do not destroy this house utterly. I am a prophet:  
I can see the omen of coming trouble.

*Theseus*

Alas, here is endless sorrow upon sorrow.  
It passes speech, passes endurance. 875

*Chorus Leader*

What is it? Tell us if we may share the story.

*Theseus*

It cries aloud, this tablet, cries aloud,  
and Death is its song! 880

*Chorus Leader*

Prelude of ruin!

*Theseus*

I shall no longer hold this secret prisoner  
in the gates of my mouth. It is horrible,  
yet I will speak.  
Citizens,  
Hippolytus has dared to rape my wife. 885  
He has dishonored God's holy sunlight.

*(He turns in the direction of the sea.)*

Father Poseidon, once you gave to me  
three curses. . . . Now with one of these, I pray,

kill my son. Suffer him not to escape,  
this very day, if you have promised truly. 890

*Chorus Leader*

Call back your curses, King, call back your curses.  
Else you will realize that you were wrong  
another day, too late. I pray you, trust me.

*Theseus*

I will not. And I now make this addition:  
I banish him from this land's boundaries.  
So fate shall strike him, one way or the other,  
either Poseidon will respect my curse, 895  
and send him dead into the House of Hades,  
or exiled from this land, a beggar wandering,  
on foreign soil, his life shall suck the dregs  
of sorrow's cup.

*Chorus Leader*

Here comes your son, and seasonably, King Theseus.  
Give over your deadly anger. You will best 900  
determine for the welfare of your house.

*(Enter Hippolytus with companions.)*

*Hippolytus*

I heard you crying, father, and came quickly.  
I know no cause why you should mourn.  
Tell me.

*(Suddenly he sees the body of Phaedra.)*

O father, father—Phaedra! Dead! She's dead! 905  
I cannot believe it. But a few moments since  
I left her. . . . And she is still so young.  
But what could it be? How did she die, father?  
I *must* hear the truth from you. You say nothing to me? 910

When you are in trouble is no time for silence  
The heart that would hear everything

## HIPPOLYTUS

is proved most greedy in misfortune's hour.  
You should not hide your troubles from your friends,  
and, father, those who are closer than your friends. 915

*Theseus*

What fools men are! You work and work for nothing,  
you teach ten thousand tasks to one another,  
invent, discover everything. One thing only  
you do not know: one thing you never hunt for—  
a way to teach fools wisdom. 920

*Hippolytus*

Clever indeed  
would be the teacher able to compel  
the stupid to be wise! This is no time  
for such fine logic chopping.  
I am afraid  
your tongue runs wild through sorrow.

*Theseus*

If there were  
some token now, some mark to make the division 925  
clear between friend and friend, the true and the false!  
All men should have two voices, one the just voice,  
and one as chance would have it. In this way  
the treacherous scheming voice would be confuted 930  
by the just, and we should never be deceived.

*Hippolytus*

Some friend has poisoned your ear with slanderous tales.  
Am I suspected, then, for all my innocence?  
I am amazed. I am amazed to hear  
your words. They are distraught. They go indeed  
far wide of the mark! 935

*Theseus*

The mind of man—how far will it advance?  
Where will its daring impudence find limits?

If human villainy and human life  
 shall wax in due proportion, if the son  
 shall always grow in wickedness past his father,  
 the Gods must add another world to this 940  
 that all the sinners may have space enough.

Look at this man! He was my son and he  
 dishonors my wife's bed! By the dead's testimony  
 he's clearly proved the vilest, falsest wretch. 945  
 Come—you could stain your conscience with the  
 impurity—  
 show me your face; show it to me, your father.

You are the veritable holy man!  
 You walked with Gods in chastity immaculate!  
 I'll not believe your boasts of God's companionship: 950  
 the Gods are not so simple nor so ignorant.  
 Go, boast that you eat no meat, that you have Orpheus  
 for your king. Read until you are demented  
 your great thick books whose substance is as smoke.  
 For I have found you out. I tell you all, 955  
 avoid such men as he. They hunt their prey  
 with holy-seeming words, but their designs  
 are black and ugly. "She is dead," you thought,  
 "and that will save me." Fool, it is chiefly that  
 which proves your guilt. What oath that you can swear, 960  
 what speech that you can make for your acquittal,  
 outweighs this letter of hers? You'll say, to be sure,  
 she was your enemy and that the bastard son  
 is always hateful to the legitimate line.  
 Your words would argue her a foolish merchant  
 whose stock of merchandise was her own life  
 if she should throw away what she held dearest  
 to gratify her enmity for you. 965

Or you will tell me that this frantic folly  
 is inborn in a woman's nature; man  
 is different: but I know that young men

are no more to be trusted than a woman  
 when love disturbs the youthful blood in them.  
 The very male in them will make them false. 970  
 But why should I debate against you in words?  
 Here is the dead, surest of witnesses.  
 Get from this land with all the speed you can  
 to exile—may you rot there! Never again  
 come to our city, God-built Athens, nor  
 to countries over which my spear is king. 975

If I should take this injury at your hands  
 and pardon you, then Sinis of the Isthmus,  
 whom once I killed, would vow I never killed him,  
 but only bragged of the deed. And Sciron's rocks  
 washed by the sea would call me liar when  
 I swore I was a terror to ill-doers. 980

*Chorus Leader*

I cannot say of any man: he is happy.  
 See here how former happiness lies uprooted!

*Hippolytus*

Your mind and intellect are subtle, father:  
 here you have a subject dressed in eloquent words;  
 but if you lay the matter bare of words, 985  
 the matter is not eloquent. I am  
 no man to speak with vapid, precious skill  
 before a mob, although among my equals  
 and in a narrow circle I am held  
 not unaccomplished in the eloquent art.  
 That is as it should be. The demagogue  
 who charms a crowd is scorned by cultured experts.  
 But here in this necessity I must speak. 990  
 First I shall take the argument you first  
 urged as so irrefutable and deadly.  
 You see the earth and air about you, father?  
 In all of that there lives no man more chaste  
 than I, though you deny it. 995

It is my rule to honor the Gods first  
 and then to have as friends only such men  
 as do no sin, nor offer wicked service,  
 nor will consent to sin to serve a friend  
 as a return for kindness. I am no railer  
 at my companions. Those who are my friends 1000  
 find me as much their friend when they are absent  
 as when we are together.

There is one thing that I have never done, the thing  
 of which you think that you convict me, father,  
 I am a virgin to this very day.  
 Save what I have heard or what I have seen in pictures, 1005  
 I'm ignorant of the deed. Nor do I wish  
 to see such things, for I've a maiden soul.  
 But say you disbelieve my chastity.  
 Then tell me how it was *your* wife seduced me:  
 was it because she was more beautiful  
 than all the other women in the world? 1010  
 Or did I think, when I had taken her,  
 to win your place and kingdom for a dowry  
 and live in your own house? I would have been  
 a fool, a senseless fool, if I had dreamed it.  
 Was rule so sweet? Never, I tell you, Theseus,  
 for the wise. A man whom power has so enchanted  
 must be demented. I would wish to be 1015  
 first in the contests of the Greeks,  
 but in the city I'd take second place  
 and an enduring happy life among  
 the best society who are my friends.  
 So one has time to work, and danger's absence  
 has charms above the royal diadem. 1020  
 But a word more and my defense is finished.  
 If I had one more witness to my character,  
 if I were tried when *she* still saw the light,  
 deeds would have helped you as you scanned your friends  
 to know the true from the false. But now I swear,  
 I swear to you by Zeus, the God of oaths, 1025

## HIPPOLYTUS

by this deep-rooted fundament of earth,  
I never sinned against you with your wife  
nor would have wished or thought of it.  
If I have been a villain, may I die  
unfamed, unknown, a homeless stateless beggar,  
an exile! May the earth and sea refuse 1030  
to give my body rest when I am dead!  
Whether your wife took her own life because  
she was afraid, I do not know. I may not speak  
further than this.  
Virtuous she was in deed, although not virtuous:  
I that have virtue used it to my ruin. 1035

### *Chorus Leader*

You have rebutted the charge enough by your oath:  
it is a great pledge you took in the God's name.

### *Theseus*

Why, here's a spell-binding magician for you!  
He wrongs his father and then trusts his craft,  
his smooth beguiling craft to lull my anger. 1040

### *Hippolytus*

Father, I must wonder at this in you.  
If I were father now, and you were son,  
I would not have banished you to exile! I  
would have killed you if I thought you touched my wife.

### *Theseus*

This speech is worthy of you: but you'll not die so. 1045  
A quick death is the easiest of ends  
for miserable men. No, you'll go wandering  
far from your fatherland and beg your way.  
This is the payment of the impious man. 1050

### *Hippolytus*

What will you do? You will not wait until  
time's pointing finger proves me innocent.  
Must I go at once to banishment?



*Theseus*

Yes, and had I the power,  
 your place of banishment would be beyond  
 the limits of the world, the encircling sea  
 and the Atlantic Pillars.  
 That is the measure of my hate, my son.

*Hippolytus*

Pledges, oaths, and oracles—you will not test them? 1055  
 You will banish me from the kingdom without trial?

*Theseus*

This letter here is proof without lot-casting.  
 The ominous birds may fly above my head:  
 they do not trouble me.

*Hippolytus*

Eternal Gods!

Dare I speak out, since I am ruined now 1060  
 through loyalty to the oath I took by you?  
 No, he would not believe who should believe  
 and I should be false to my oath for nothing.

*Theseus*

This is more of your holy juggling!  
 I cannot stomach it. Away with you!  
 Get from this country—and go quickly! 1065

*Hippolytus*

Where shall I turn? What friend will take me in,  
 when I am banished on a charge like this?

*Theseus*

Doubtless some man who loves to entertain  
 his wife's seducers welcoming them at the hearth.

*Hippolytus*

That blow went home. 1070

## HIPPOLYTUS

I am near crying when I think that I  
am judged to be guilty and that it is you who are judge.

*Theseus*

You might have sobbed and snivelled long ago,  
and thought of that before when you resolved  
to rape your father's wife.

*Hippolytus*

House, speak for me!  
Take voice and bear me witness if I have sinned. 1075

*Theseus*

You have a clever trick of citing witnesses,  
whose testimony is dumb. Here is your handiwork.

*(Points to the body.)*

It, too, can't speak—but it convicts you.

*Hippolytus*

If I could only find  
another *me* to look me in the face  
and see my tears and all that I am suffering!

*Theseus*

Yes, in self-worship you are certainly practiced. 1080  
You are more at home there than in the other virtues,  
justice, for instance, and duty toward a father.

*Hippolytus*

Unhappy mother mine, and bitter birth-pangs,  
when you gave me to the world! I would not wish  
on any of my friends a bastard's birth.

*Thesus (to the servants)*

Drag him away!  
Did you not hear me, men, a long time since  
proclaiming his decree of banishment? 1085

*Hippolytus*

Let one of them touch me at his peril! But you,  
you drive me out yourself—if you have the heart!

*Theseus*

I'll do it, too, unless you go at once.  
No, there is no chance that pity for your exile  
will steal on my hard heart and make me change.

*(Theseus goes out.)*

*Hippolytus*

So, I'm condemned and there is no release. 1090  
I know the truth and dare not tell the truth.

*(He turns to the statue of Artemis.)*

Daughter of Leto, dearest of the Gods to me,  
comrade and partner in the hunt, behold me,  
banished from famous Athens.  
Farewell, city! Farewell Erechtheus' land! 1095  
Troezen, farewell! So many happy times  
you knew to give a young man, growing up.  
This is the last time I shall look upon you,  
the last time I shall greet you.

*(To his companions.)*

Come friends, you are of my age and of this country,  
say your farewells and set me on my way.  
You will not see a man more innocent— 1100  
innocent despite my judge!—condemned to banishment.

*(Hippolytus goes out.)*

*Chorus*

STROPHE

The care of God for us is a great thing,  
if a man believe it at heart:  
it plucks the burden of sorrow from him.  
So I have a secret hope 1105  
of someone, a God, who is wise and plans;

# HIPPOLYTUS

but my hopes grow dim when I see  
the deeds of men and their destinies.

For fortune is ever veering, and the currents of life are  
shifting  
shifting, wandering forever. 1110

## ANTISTROPHE

This is the lot in life I seek  
and I pray that God may grant it me,  
luck and prosperity  
and a heart untroubled by anguish.  
And a mind that is neither false clipped coin,  
nor too clear-eyed in sincerity, 1115  
that I may lightly change my ways,  
my ways of today when tomorrow comes,  
and so be happy all my life long.

## STROPHE

My heart is no longer clear: 1120  
I have seen what I never dreamed,  
I have seen the brightest star of Athens,  
stricken by a father's wrath,  
banished to an alien land. 1125

Sands of the seashore!  
Thicket of the mountain!  
Where with his pacing hounds  
he hunted wild beasts and killed  
to the honor of holy Dictynna. 1130

## ANTISTROPHE

He will never again mount his car  
with its span of Venetian mares,  
nor fill the ring of Limnae with the sound of horses'  
hoofs.  
The music which never slept  
on the strings of his lyre, shall be dumb, 1135

shall be dumb in his father's house.  
 The haunts of the Goddess Maid  
 in the deep rich meadow shall want their crowns.  
 You are banished: there's an end 1140  
 of the rivalry of maids for your love.

## EPODE

But my sorrow shall not die,  
 still my eyes shall be wet with tears  
 for your heartless doom.  
 Sad mother, you bore him in vain: 1145  
 I am angry against the Gods.  
 Sister Graces, why did you let him go  
 guiltless, out of his native land,  
 out of his father's house? 1150

But here I see Hippolytus' servant,  
 in haste making for the house, his face sorrowful.

## SCENE VI

(*Enter a Messenger.*)

*Messenger*

Where shall I go to find King Theseus, women?  
 If you know, tell me. Is he within doors? 1155

*Chorus*

Here he is coming out.

*Messenger*

King Theseus,  
 I bring you news worthy of much thought  
 for you and all the citizens who live  
 in Athens' walls and boundaries of Troezen.

*Theseus*

What is it? Has some still newer disaster 1160  
 seized my two neighboring cities?

*Messenger*

Hippolytus is dead: I may almost say dead:

## HIPPOLYTUS

he sees the light of day still, though the balance  
that holds him in this world is slight indeed.

### *Theseus*

Who killed him? I can guess that someone hated him,  
whose wife he raped, as he did mine, his father's. 1165

### *Messenger*

It was the horses of his own car that killed him,  
they, and the curses of your lips,  
the curses you invoked against your son,  
and prayed the Lord of Ocean to fulfil them.

### *Theseus*

O Gods—Poseidon, you are then truly  
my father! You have heard my prayers. 1170  
How did he die? Tell me. How did the beam  
of Justice's dead-fall strike him, my dishonorer?

### *Messenger*

We were combing our horses' coats beside the sea,  
where the waves came crashing to the shore. And we were  
crying  
for one had come and told us that our master, 1175  
Hippolytus, should walk this land no more,  
since you had laid hard banishment upon him.  
Then he came himself down to the shore to us,  
with the same refrain of tears,  
and with him walked a countless company  
of friends and young men his own age. 1180

But at last he gave over crying and said:  
Why do I rave like this? It is my father  
who has commanded and I must obey him.  
Prepare my horses, men, and harness them.  
There is no longer a city of mine.  
Then every man made haste. Before you could say the  
words, 1185

there was the chariot ready before our master.  
 He put his feet into the driver's rings,  
 and took the reins from the rail into his hands.  
 But first he folded his hands like this and prayed: 1190  
 Zeus, let me die now, if I have been guilty!  
 Let my father know that he has done me wrong,  
 whether I live to see the day or not.

With that, he took the goad and touched the horses.  
 And we his servants followed our master's car, 1195  
 close by the horses' heads, on the straight road  
 that leads to Argos and to Epidaurus.

When we were entering the lonely country  
 the other side of the border, where the shore 1200  
 goes down to the Saronic Gulf, a rumbling  
 deep in the earth, terrible to hear,  
 growled like the thunder of Father Zeus.

The horses raised their heads, pricked up their ears,  
 and gusty fear was on us all to know,  
 whence came the sound. As we looked toward the shore, 1205  
 where the waves were beating, we saw a wave appear,  
 a miracle wave, lifting its crest to the sky,  
 so high that Sciron's coast was blotted out  
 from my eye's vision. And it hid the Isthmus  
 and the Asclepius Rock. To the shore it came, 1210  
 swelling, boiling, crashing, casting its surf around,  
 to where the chariot stood.

But at the very moment when it broke,  
 the wave threw up a monstrous savage bull.  
 Its bellowing filled the land, and the land echoed it, 1215  
 with shuddering emphasis. And sudden panic  
 fell on the horses in the car. But the master—  
 he was used to horses' ways—all his life long  
 he had been with horses—took a firm grip of the reins 1220  
 and lashed the ends behind his back and pulled  
 like a sailor at the oar. The horses bolted:  
 their teeth were clenched upon the fire-forged bit.  
 They heeded neither the driver's hand nor harness

# HI PP O LY T U S

nor the jointed car. As often as he would turn them  
with guiding hand to the soft sand of the shore,  
the bull appeared in front to head them off,  
maddening the team with terror. 1225

But when in frenzy they charged toward the cliffs,  
the bull came galloping beside the rail,  
silently following until he brought disaster,  
capsizing the car, striking the wheel on a rock. 1230

Then all was in confusion. Axles of wheels,  
and lynch-pins flew up into the air, 1235  
and he the unlucky driver, tangled in the reins,  
was dragged along in an inextricable

knot, and his dear head pounded on the rocks,  
his body bruised. He cried aloud and terrible  
his voice rang in our ears: Stand, horses, stand!  
You were fed in my stables. Do not kill me! 1240  
My father's curse! His curse! Will none of you  
save me? I am innocent. Save me!

Many of us had will enough, but all  
were left behind in the race. Getting free of the reins,  
somehow he fell. There was still life in him. 1245  
But the horses vanished and that ill-omened monster,  
somewhere, I know not where, in the rough cliffs.

I am only a slave in your household, King Theseus,  
but I shall never be able to believe 1250  
that your son was guilty, not though the tribe of women  
were hanged for it, not though the weight of tablets  
of a high pine of Ida, filled with writing,  
accused him—for I know that he was good.

## *Chorus Leader*

It has been fulfilled, this bitter, new disaster, 1255  
for what is doomed and fated there is no quittance.

## *Theseus*

For hatred of the sufferer I was glad



# EURIPIDES

at what you told me. Still, he was my son.  
As such I have reverence for him and the Gods:  
I neither rejoice nor sorrow at this thing. 1260

## *Messenger*

What is your pleasure that we do with him?  
Would you have him brought to you? If I might counsel,  
you would not be harsh with your son—now he is  
unfortunate.

## *Theseus*

Bring him to me that I may see his face. 1265  
He swore that he had never wronged my wife.  
I will refute him with God's punishing stroke.

## *Chorus*

Cypris, you guide men's hearts  
and the inflexible  
hearts of the Gods and with you  
comes Love with the flashing wings, 1270  
comes Love with the swiftest of wings.  
Over the earth he flies  
and the loud-echoing salt-sea.  
He bewitches and maddens the heart  
of the victim he swoops upon. 1275  
He bewitches the race of the mountain-hunting  
lions and beasts of the sea,  
and all the creatures that earth feeds,  
and the blazing sun sees—  
and man, too—  
over all you hold kingly power, 1280  
Love, you are only ruler  
over all these.

## EPILOGUE

## *Artemis*

I call on the noble king, the son of Aegeus,  
to hear me! It is I, Artemis, child of Leto. 1285

# HIPPLYTUS

Miserable man, what joy have you in this?  
You have murdered a son, you have broken nature's  
laws.

Dark indeed was the conclusion  
you drew from your wife's lying accusations,  
but plain for all to see is the destruction  
to which they led you.

There is a hell beneath the earth: haste to it, 1290  
and hide your head there! Or will you take wings,  
and choosing the life of a bird instead of man  
keep your feet from destruction's path in which they  
tread?

Among good men, at least, you have no share in life. 1295  
Hear me tell you, Theseus, how these things came to pass.  
I shall not better them, but I will give you pain.  
I have come here for this—to show you that your son's  
heart

was always just, so just that for his good name  
he endured to die. I will show you, too,  
the frenzied love that seized your wife, or I may call it, 1300  
a noble innocence. For that most hated Goddess,  
hated by all of us whose joy is virginity,  
drove her with love's sharp prickings to desire  
your son. She tried to overcome her love  
with the mind's power, but at last against her will,  
she fell by the nurse's stratagems, 1305  
the nurse, who told your son under oath her mistress  
loved him.

But he, just man, did not fall in with her  
counsels, and even when reviled by you  
refused to break the oath he had pledged.  
Such was his piety. But your wife fearing  
lest she be proved the sinner wrote a letter, 1310  
a letter full of lies; and so she killed  
your son by treachery; but she convinced you.

*Theseus*  
Alas!

*Artemis*

This is a bitter story, Theseus. Stay,  
 hear more that you may groan the more.  
 You know you had three curses from your father, 1315  
 three, clear for you to use? One you have launched,  
 vile wretch, at your own son, when you might have  
 spent it upon an enemy. Your father,  
 King of the Sea, in loving kindness to you  
 gave you, by his bequest, all that he ought.  
 But you've been proved at fault both in his eyes 1320  
 and mine in that you did not stay for oaths  
 nor voice of oracles, nor gave a thought  
 to what time might have shown; only too quickly  
 you hurled the curses at your son and killed him.

*Theseus*

Mistress, I am destroyed.

*Artemis*

You have sinned indeed, but yet you may win pardon. 1325  
 For it was Cypris managed the thing this way  
 to gratify her anger against Hippolytus.  
 This is the settled custom of the Gods:  
 No one may fly in the face of another's wish:  
 we remain aloof and neutral. Else, I assure you, 1330  
 had I not feared Zeus, I never would have endured  
 such shame as this—my best friend among men  
 killed, and I could do nothing.  
 As for you, in the first place ignorance acquits you,  
 and then your wife, by her death, destroyed the proofs, 1335  
 the verbal proofs which might have still convinced you.  
 You and I are the chief sufferers, Theseus.  
 Misfortune for you, grief for me.  
 The Gods do not rejoice when pious worshippers die: 1340  
 the wicked we destroy, children, house and all.

*Chorus*

Here comes the suffering Hippolytus,

# HIPPOLYTUS

his fair young body and his golden head,  
a battered wreck. O trouble of the house,  
what double sorrow from the hand of God  
has been fulfilled for this our royal palace! 1345

## *Hippolytus*

A battered wreck of body! Unjust father,  
and oracle unjust—this is your work.  
Woe for my fate! 1350

My head is filled with shooting agony,  
and in my brain there is a leaping fire.  
Let me be!

For I would rest my weary frame awhile.  
Curse on my team! How often have I fed you  
from my own hand, you who have murdered me!  
O, O! 1355

In God's name touch my wounded body gently.  
Who is this standing on the right of me? 1360

Come lift me carefully, bear me easily,  
a man unlucky, cursed by my own father  
in bitter error. Zeus, do you see this,  
see me that worshipped God in piety,  
me that excelled all men in chastity, 1365  
see me now go to death which gapes before me;  
all my life lost, and all for nothing now  
labors of piety in the face of men?

O the pain, the pain that comes upon me! 1370  
Let me be, let me be, you wretches!

May death the healer come for me at last!  
You kill me ten times over with this pain.  
O for a spear with a keen cutting edge 1375  
to shear me apart—and give me my last sleep!  
Father, your deadly curse!

This evil comes from some manslaying of old, 1380  
some ancient tale of murder among my kin.

But why should it strike me, who am clear of guilt?  
What is there to say? How can I shake from me 1385

this pitiless pain? O death, black night of death,  
resistless death, come to me now the miserable,  
and give me sleep!

*Artemis*

Unhappy boy! You are yoked to a cruel fate.  
The nobility of your soul has proved your ruin. 1390

*Hippolytus*

O divine fragrance! Even in my pain  
I sense it, and the suffering is lightened.  
The Goddess Artemis is near this place.

*Artemis*

She is, the dearest of the Gods to you.

*Hippolytus*

You see my suffering, mistress? 1395

*Artemis*

I see it. Heavenly law forbids my tears.

*Hippolytus*

Gone is your huntsman, gone your servant now.

*Artemis*

Yes, truly: but you die beloved by me.

*Hippolytus*

Gone is your groom, gone your shrine's guardian.

*Artemis*

Cypris, the worker of mischief, so contrived. 1400

*Hippolytus*

Alas, I know the Goddess who destroyed me!

*Artemis*

She blamed your disrespect, hated your chastity.

HIPPOLYTUS

*Hippolytus*

She claimed us three as victims then, did Cypris?

*Artemis*

Your father, you, and me to make a third.

*Hippolytus*

Yes, I am sorry for my father's suffering. 1405

*Artemis*

Cypris deceived him by her cunning snares.

*Hippolytus*

O father, this is sorrow for you indeed!

*Theseus*

I, too, am dead now. I have no more joy in life.

*Hippolytus*

I sorrow for you in this more than myself.

*Theseus*

Would that it was I who was dying instead of you! 1410

*Hippolytus*

Bitter were Poseidon's gifts, my father, bitter.

*Theseus*

Would that they had never come into my mouth.

*Hippolytus*

Even without them, you would have killed me—  
you were so angry.

*Theseus*

A God tripped up my judgment.

*Hippolytus*

O, if only men might be a curse to Gods! 1415

*Artemis*

Hush, that is enough! You shall not be unavenged,  
Cypris shall find the angry shafts she hurled  
against you for your piety and innocence  
shall cost her dear.

I'll wait until she loves a mortal next time, 1420  
and with this hand—with these unerring arrows  
I'll punish him.

To you, unfortunate Hippolytus,  
by way of compensation for these ills,  
I will give the greatest honors of Troezen.  
Unwedded maids before the day of marriage 1425  
will cut their hair in your honor. You will reap  
through the long cycle of time, a rich reward in tears.  
And when young girls sing songs, they will not forget you,  
your name will not be left unmentioned,  
nor Phaedra's love for you remain unsung. 1430

(*To Theseus.*)

Son of old Aegeus, take your son  
to your embrace. Draw him to you. Unknowing  
you killed him. It is natural for men  
to err when they are blinded by the Gods.

(*To Hippolytus.*)

Do not bear a grudge against your father. 1435  
It was fate that you should die so.  
Farewell, I must not look upon the dead.  
My eye must not be polluted by the last  
gasping for breath. I see you are near this.

*Hippolytus*

Farewell to you, too, holy maiden! Go in peace. 1440  
You can lightly leave a long companionship.  
You bid me end my quarrel with my father,  
and I obey. In the past, too, I obeyed you.

The darkness is upon my eyes already.

Father, lay hold on me and lift me up. 1445

## HIPPOLYTUS

*Theseus*

Alas, what are you doing to me, my son?

*Hippolytus*

I am dying. I can see the gates of death.

*Theseus*

And so you leave me, my hands stained with murder.

*Hippolytus*

No, for I free you from all guilt in this.

*Theseus*

You will acquit me of blood guiltiness? 1450

*Hippolytus*

So help me Artemis of the conquering bow!

*Theseus*

Dear son, how noble you have proved to me!

*Hippolytus*

Yes, pray to heaven for such legitimate sons.

*Theseus*

Woe for your goodness, piety, and virtue.

*Hippolytus*

Farewell to you, too, father, a long farewell! 1455

*Theseus*

Dear son, bear up. Do not forsake me.

*Hippolytus*

This is the end of what I have to bear.  
I'm gone. Cover my face up quickly.

*Theseus*

Pallas Athene's famous city,  
what a man you have lost! Alas for me! 1460



Cypris, how many of your injuries  
I shall remember.

*Chorus*

This is a common grief for all the city;  
it came unlooked for. There shall be  
a storm of multitudinous tears for this;  
the lamentable stories of great men  
prevail more than of humble folk.

1465

# THE CYCLOPS

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

WILLIAM ARROWSMITH



## INTRODUCTION TO *CYCLOPS* \*

Interest in Euripides' *Cyclops* is generally justified historically: other than a chunk of Sophocles' *Ichneutae*, it is the only example of a satyr-play, that ribald piece which in the dramatic festivals crowned a group of three tragedies or a tragic trilogy. But the *Cyclops* is more than historically interesting; it is, by modern standards, good fast farce, clearly stageworthy, with a fine dramatic intelligence behind it. The movement is typically Euripidean, not merely in the sharp reversal of roles and sympathies, the crisp dialogue and the consistent anachronization, but in formal structure and underlying idea as well. Moreover, despite the play's sportive obscenity and knockabout humor, its underlying idea is essentially serious. The *Cyclops*, that is, may be clearly a farce, but it is primarily a farce of ideas, a gay and ironic flirtation with the problem of civilized brutality. As such, it lies within the main stream of Euripides' tragic thought, and, if its treatment and tone differ from that of tragedy, the difference is less a difference of dramatic quality or genius than a difference of genre.

We should like to know a great deal more about satyr-drama as a genre than we do, and we should especially like to know what in fifth-century practice was the formal connection between a satyr-play and the three tragedies which preceded it. But unfortunately the *Cyclops* is undated and cannot, with any degree of certainty, be assigned to one of the extant tragedies.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of that crucial information, it be-

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1. The most tempting suggestion has been, I think, that the

comes difficult to speak with assurance of the formal nature of the play or to generalize from it to the formal definition of fifth-century satyr-drama. Indeed, even if we possessed the requisite information, the very distance which separates the tragedy of Euripides from that of Aeschylus and Sophocles would tend by analogy to preclude a generalization about satyr-plays. One ancient writer, it is true, speaks of satyr-drama as being "tragedy-at-play" or "joking tragedy."<sup>2</sup> But this is hardly helpful, since it may mean either that satyr-drama was mock tragedy, or tragedy *buffa*, or pure farce, or simply a sportive treatment of the subject matter of tragedy. All of these are possibilities applicable to the *Cyclops*, but we have no evidence which might allow us to decide among them.

In point of origins the satyr-play, like both comedy and tragedy, was closely bound up with Dionysiac fertility ritual. Even in the fifth century satyr-drama in its frequent obscenity, its conventional use of Silenus as "nurse" and companion of Dionysus, and its chorus of satyrs with their *phalloi* preserves more vividly than tragedy the memory of its origins. What the original connection between tragedy and comedy and "satyr" may have been, we do not know, though Aristotle in a much disputed passage asserts that the satyr-play was one of the early stages of tragedy;<sup>3</sup> but the value of the testimony appears

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*Cyclops* should be assigned to a group of three tragedies of which the extant *Hecuba* was one. (The *Hecuba* is dated, on very good grounds, almost certainly to 425 B.C.) The assignment is strengthened not merely by topical considerations (cf. E. Delebecque, *Euripide et la guerre du Péloponnèse*) but by very close formal resemblances between the two plays. Thus the blinding of Polyphemus parallels the blinding of Polymnestor, and Polyphemus' final appearance from the cave vividly recalls Polymnestor's emergence from the tent. In both plays again, the guiding idea is that of civilized brutality, and in both cases a barbaric vengeance is taken upon a barbarian (Polymnestor, Polyphemus) by a "civilized" person (*Hecuba*, Odysseus). The final prophecies again closely parallel each other, and the portrayal of Odysseus in the *Hecuba* is given a great deal of point if we have in mind the sequel in *Cyclops*. In the dovetailing of actions and the reversal of roles, the two plays are strikingly similar.

2. Demetrius of Phalerum *De interp.* 169; cf. Horace *Ars poetica*

231-33.

3. *Poetics* 1449<sup>a</sup> 9 ff.

doubtful.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, scholars have preferred to believe that both satyr-drama and tragedy are independent developments of Dionysiac ritual and that satyr-drama was probably adopted by the dramatist Pratinas from a Peloponnesian source and attached to the Attic festivals. Alternatively, it is held that the double aspect of Dionysiac ritual—mourning for the dead god and joyous celebration at his resurrection—accounts for the connection between tragedy and the satyr-play. On this theory tragedy contains the *agon* of the dying god, while the satyr-play, like comedy, exhibits the happy celebration for the reborn god and the ritual of the sacred marriage and rounds off the complete drama of the rite in a sportive coda. The presence in the *Cyclops* of an attenuated *komos* and a hinted mock (male) marriage between Silenus and Polyphemus offers some slight evidence for the theory. But it is this very attenuation of the ritual element in the play that reminds us that a theory of formal origins does not really explain what we need to know—the *literary* use and the meaning of the developed form. An account of origins may perhaps explain the conventions of a given form, but it will seldom explain the conscious literary deployment of those conventions.

For the rest our information is tantalizingly slight. Thus we know that the satyr-plays were briefer than the tragedies (the *Cyclops* is the shortest of extant plays); they had their own peculiar choral dance, the *sikinnis*, and they allowed, in prosody and diction, a very slight relaxation from tragic standards in the direction of colloquial speech. For its material satyr-drama drew upon the same sources in myth and *epos* as tragedy. Thus the *Oresteia* appears to have been followed by the *Proteus*, a satyr-play dealing with Menelaus' Egyptian adventure with the Old Man of the Sea, while the *Cyclops* is a conflation of the Polyphemus episode from the ninth book of the *Odyssey* with the story of the capture of Dionysus by Lydian pirates.<sup>5</sup> Both the chorus of satyrs and its "father"

4. Cf. A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy* (Oxford, 1927), p. 124.

5. Cf. *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*.

Silenus form a standard part of satyric convention, and their characters are accordingly stylized: the satyrs are boisterous, childlike "horse-men" (not "goat-men") with a strong streak of cowardice, while Silenus is at every point the ancestor of Falstaff—lewd, fat, bald, drunken, boastful, knavish, and foolish. Finally, it needs to be stressed that, however comic a satyr-play may seem, it is not to be confounded with Greek comedy, which differs from it not only in its material (usually free invention or mythological burlesque), but in structure, conventions, and the degree of topicality and license.

In plot and detail Euripides' adaptation of his Homeric material is remarkably close. If Odysseus here does not escape from the cave by clinging to a ram's belly, and if the immense boulder which in Homer blocked the cave has here been rolled away, these are clearly alterations demanded by the necessities of theatrical presentation. In Euripides the Cyclops is still the creature of his belly, a barking barbarian, and Odysseus is still in some sense the shrewd and civilized man who manages by exercise of mother wit to mutilate the man-eating monster and escape. Or so, at least, it might seem if we possessed only the first half of the play. But the *Cyclops* is not merely a dramatic retelling of Homer; rather, it is Homer's parable of the civilized man and the savage systematically anachronized into its fifth-century equivalent, an altogether different parable.

Neither Odysseus nor Polyphemus is really Homeric at all. Odysseus is not the type of the civilized man, and the Euripidean Cyclops, like the United States in Wilde's epigram, has passed directly from barbarism to decadence without pause for civilization. Both manifest late fifth-century types of corruption: Odysseus' Homeric heroism in its new context is systematically undercut, less heroism than a transparent vain-glory and depraved eloquence; Polyphemus is less Caliban than Callicles, an outright exponent of philosophical egoism and the immoralist equation of might and right. Euripides has taken considerable pains, moreover, to indicate to his audience that this is no longer Homer's world, but their own. Thus, when Odysseus first appears, he is greeted by Silenus

as a "glib sharper" and "son of Sisyphus." Now, whatever Odysseus may be in Homer, he is never merely a "glib sharper," and his father is Laertes, not Sisyphus. To an audience bred on Homer the distinction is revealing: at one blow Euripides deprives Odysseus of his Homeric paternity in order to attach him to Sisyphus, the proverbial type of cheat and thief, and thereby warns his audience of what they may expect. Odysseus is in fact the familiar depraved politician of the *Hecuba*, the *Trojan Women*, and the *Iphigeneia at Aulis*; he stands, as he almost always does in tragedy, for that refinement of intellect and eloquence which makes civilized brutality so much more terrible than mere savagery. In the *Cyclops*, however, he is on the defensive, and there is irony in the reversal of roles as the man who refused mercy and *nomos* to Hecuba must now himself plead for it. If we sympathize with Odysseus at first, this initial sympathy is nonetheless quickly alienated by the sheer, otiose brutality of his revenge and by Polyphemus' transformation into a drunken, almost lovable, buffoon. The gory description of the Cyclops' cannibalism may perhaps justify Odysseus' revenge, but it does not thereby redeem its barbaric cruelty. Just as the full action of the *Hecuba* consists in reducing both Hecuba and the barbarian Polymnestor to a common subhuman cruelty, so the *Cyclops* shows, not the distinction, but the identity, between Odysseus and Polyphemus.

Odysseus' speech for *nomos* and mercy is the crux of the play. As Silenus recognizes, the speech is pure sophistry, but the sophistry has important consequences that we need to examine. The difficulty lies in the thoroughness of the anachronization and the allusions to the sanctions and background of the Peloponnesian War.

It opens with a disclaimer of responsibility for the Trojan War: "A god was responsible; don't blame men." Such disclaimers in Euripides normally operate to damn those who make them, as, for instance, Helen's disavowal of responsibility in the *Trojan Women*. The next argument sounds very strange indeed. The Greeks, Odysseus argues, have preserved the temples of Poseidon (father of Cyclops) and saved Hellas;



therefore the Cyclops, who is Greek because he lives in Greek Sicily (another anachronism), should spare Odysseus and his men. What we have here is a covert but unmistakable allusion to the Persian Wars, when Athens claimed to have saved Hellas and the ancestral gods from the Persians. There is irony in the claim that it was piety which saved the silver-mines of Laurium on Cape Sunium (where there happened to be a shrine to Poseidon), but the larger irony is somewhat more complex.

What Odysseus is urging here is nothing more or less than the argument which Athens had used to acquire her empire: Athens had saved Hellas and should have the rewards of her deed. This sanction for empire was employed down to the time of the Peloponnesian War to coerce neutrals and unwilling states into the Athenian orbit, and the sanction was as loathsome to most Greeks as the Athenian Empire. Herodotus, writing in the forties, is so much aware of the unpopularity of Athens and her sanction that he is reluctant to state the real truth which underlies the sanction—Athens *did* save Hellas. In 432 B.C., just before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, the unofficial Athenian envoys at Sparta could say of their empire:

We have a fair claim to our possessions. . . . We need not refer to remote antiquity . . . but to the Persian War and contemporary history we must refer, although we are rather tired of continually bringing this subject forward.<sup>6</sup>

By 416, the Athenian generals at Melos could argue naked imperialism; the empire had outgrown its sanction:

We shall not trouble you with specious pretences . . . either of how we have a right to our empire because we overthrew the Persians, or are now attacking you because of wrong that you have done us . . . since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.<sup>7</sup>

6. Thuc. i. 73. 2 ff.

7. *Ibid.* v. 89.

This, then, is the sanction Odysseus urges, and it is one whose irony it would be difficult for his audience to miss. The irony lies in the fact that an argument normally used to deny mercy to others is here being used to obtain it. When it fails before the Cyclops' massive egoism, Odysseus resorts to the ultimate argument of the weak, law and civilized custom (*nomos*). In so doing he joins Thucydides' Plataeans and Melians, as well as his own victim Hecuba. And, like Hecuba, failing to receive *nomos*, he finally resorts to a revenge utterly unsanctioned by any civilized standards, *anomos*. The speech closes on an overt reference to the cost of human suffering in the Peloponnesian War. And here, as so often in Euripides, the really serious argument is put in the mouth of a man who is not qualified to make it, or who contradicts it in his actions. The contradiction lies in the inverted use of the imperialistic sanction and the implied indifference to human suffering in other circumstances.

If Odysseus speaks in part the language of the Athenian imperialists and in part the language of the Melians, the Cyclops outdistances him by far. Devoid of respect for the gods, his religion is his belly and his right his desires. He speaks exactly the language of Plato's Thrasymachus and Callicles, a straightforward egoism resting on an appeal to Nature for the disregard of morality. *Nomos*, so far as he is concerned, is a mere convention of the weak to elude the strong. In the contrast, then, of Polyphemus and Odysseus we have no Homeric contrast of barbarism and cool, civilized intelligence, but a juxtaposition of two related types of civilized brutality whose difference is merely that of circumstance, one being weak, the other strong. It is because neither Cyclops nor Odysseus has any genuine moral dignity, because both of them are shown as effectively brutal and corrupt, that the bloody blinding of Polyphemus can come as close to pathos as it does without becoming any less comic.

The ending is in fact superbly controlled. As usual in Euripides, the sympathy invoked for one character is suddenly alienated and shifted to another; the victim and the oppressor change places. Polyphemus, from being first a Homeric can-

nibal and then a Euripidean Callicles, is suddenly turned into a decadent, rather likable buffoon who loathes war, understands generosity, and tipsily "rapes" Silenus. Odysseus makes his bid for glory by blinding this cannibal oaf while he sleeps drunkenly. The shift in sympathy is not decisive, because no real principle is involved; but it is not therefore illusory. Odysseus' action is contemptible, but not quite criminal; Polyphemus gets what he deserves, but we pity him. That we are meant to view the action in this way seems clear both in Polyphemus' final prophecy of trouble for Odysseus and in Odysseus' statement that he would have done wrong had he burned Troy but not avenged his men. Whatever his rights in avenging his men may be, they are not sanctioned by the burning of Troy, an action which the Cyclops condemns, and with him Euripides. The truth is that Odysseus and the Cyclops deserve, not justice, but each other. The *Cyclops* in its seriousness and its humor plays about a struggle for justice between two men who either distort justice or deny its existence and who cannot therefore meaningfully claim it when wronged. And yet they get it.



CHARACTERS

*Silenus*

*Chorus of satyrs*

*Coryphaeus, or chorus-leader*

*Odysseus*

*Cyclops, called Polyphemus*

*Members of Odysseus' crew*

*Slaves*

## THE CYCLOPS

SCENE: *An enormous cave at the foot of Mt. Etna. In the foreground, a slope of pasture; on the right, a small brook. Silenus comes out of the cave to speak the prologue. He is old, fat, and bald. A horse's tail hangs down his legs. He wears a filthy tunic and carries a rake.*

*Silenus*

O Bromios,

thanks to you, my troubles are as many now  
as in my youth when my body still was strong!  
First I remember when Hera drove you mad  
and you left your nurses, the mountain nymphs.  
And then there was that war with the Giants: 5  
there I stood, on your right, covering your flank  
with my spear. And I hit Enceladus  
square on the button of his shield and killed him.  
Or wait: was that in a dream? No, by Zeus,  
for I showed the very spoils to Bacchus.  
And now I must bail against a wilder wave 10  
of trouble. For when I heard that Hera  
had pricked on those Lydian pirates to sell you  
as a slave abroad, I hoisted sail with my sons  
to search for you. Right on the stern I stood,  
the tiller in my hands, steering the ship. 15  
And my boys strained at the oars, churning white  
the green sea in our search for you, my king!  
And then we had almost made Malea

when an east wind cracked down and drove us here,  
 to rocky Etna, where the one-eyed sons 20  
 of the sea-god, the murderous Cyclopes,  
 live in their desolate caves. One of them—  
 they call him Polyphemus—captured us  
 and made us slaves in his house. So now,  
 instead of dancing in the feasts of Bacchus, 25  
 we herd the flocks of this godless Cyclops.  
 Down at the foot of the mountain, my sons—  
 young men all of them—watch the youngling herd.  
 I am assigned to stay and fill the troughs  
 and clean the quarters and play the chef 30  
 for the loathsome dinners of the Cyclops.  
 And now I must scour the cave with this rake—  
 these are my orders—to welcome back home  
 my absent master and his flock of sheep. 35

*(He halts suddenly, turns to the left and looks. A confused hubbub, mingled with singing, offstage.)*

But I see my sons shepherding their sheep  
 this way. What? (*Shouts.*) How can you dance like that?  
 Do you think you're mustered at Bacchus' feast  
 and mincing your lewd way with lyre-music  
 to the halls of Althaea? 40

*(Preceded by a flute-player and driving their herds before them, the chorus of satyrs bounds into the orchestra. Except for short goatskin jerkins, they are naked. About their waists they wear belts—skin-colored—to each of which is fixed, in front, a phallus, and in the rear, a horse's tail. They do a series of fast and intricate steps as they push the stubborn rams, coax the ewes, and round up the strays.)*

Chorus

*(To a ewe who dashes for the slope.)*

# THE CYCLOPS

## STROPHE

You there, with the fine pedigree  
on both sides, dam and sire,  
    why run for the rocks?  
Haven't you here a quiet breeze,  
    green grass for the grazing? 45  
Look: the water from the brook  
beside the cave  
    swirls through your troughs  
and the small lambs bleat.

(*To an obstinate ram.*)

Hey, you too? Are you off as well  
to crop on the dew on the hill? 50  
Move, or I'll pelt you with stones!  
In with you, horny-head, move along  
into the fold of Shepherd Cyclops!

(*To a stubborn ewe.*)

## ANTISTROPHE

Relieve your swollen teats! 55  
Come, suckle your young whom you left  
    all alone in the lamb-pens!  
Asleep all day, your new-born lambs  
    bleat that they want you.  
Leave your cropping and into the fold, 60  
    into the rocks of Etna!

[Hey, you too? Are you off as well  
to crop on the dew on the hill?  
Move, or I'll pelt you with stones!  
In with you, horny-head, move along  
into the fold of Shepherd Cyclops!]

## EPODE

No Bacchus here! Not here the dance,  
or the women whirling the *thyrsos*,  
or the timbrels shaken, 65  
where the springs rill up!



Not here the gleam of wine,  
 and no more at Nysa with nymphs,  
 crying *Iacchos! Iacchos!*  
*Where is Aphrodite?* . . . 70  
 she that I used to fly after  
 along with the bare-footed Bacchae!  
 Dear lord Bacchus, where do you run,  
 tossing your auburn hair? 75  
 For I, your servant, am a wretched slave,  
 tricked out in dirty goatskin 80  
 to serve a one-eyed Cyclops,  
 and out of the way, lord, of your love.

*(Silenus, who has been scanning anxiously the horizon  
 on the right, turns suddenly, his finger on his lips.)*

*Silenus*

Be quiet, my sons. Quick, order the slaves  
 to corral the flocks into the rock-fold.

*Coryphaeus*

Move along there.

*(Slaves appear and hustle the animals into the cave.)*

But why this hurry, father?

*Silenus*

I see a Greek ship drawn up on the shore 85  
 and oarsmen led by a captain coming  
 toward our cave. They carry water-pitchers  
 and empty containers about their necks:  
 they'll want supplies. Poor strangers, who are they?  
 They can't know our master Polyphemus, 90  
 coming like this to the man-eater's cave  
 and looking for a welcome in his maw.  
 But hush, so we can learn from where they've come,  
 and why, to Sicily and Mt. Etna. 95

THE CYCLOPS

*(Odysseus appears on the right. He carries a sword.  
A wine-flask made of skin is suspended from his  
neck; a cup is attached to the cord. He is followed  
by crew-members carrying pitchers and jugs.)*

*Odysseus*

Strangers, could you tell us where we might find  
running water? We have nothing to drink.  
Would some one of you like to sell some food  
to hungry sailors? *What?* Do I see right?  
We must have come to the city of Bacchus.  
These are satyrs I see around the cave.  
Let me greet the oldest among you first.

100

*Silenus*

Greeting, stranger. Who are you, and from where?

*Odysseus*

I am Odysseus of Ithaca, king of the Cephallenians.

*Silenus*

I've heard of you: a glib sharper, Sisyphus' bastard.

*Odysseus*

I am he. Keep your abuse to yourself.

105

*Silenus*

From what port did you set sail for Sicily?

*Odysseus*

We come from Troy and from the war there.

*Silenus*

What? Couldn't you chart your passage home?

*Odysseus*

We were driven here by wind and storm.

*Silenus*

Too bad. I had the same misfortune.

110

*Odysseus*

You too were driven from your course by storm?

*Silenus*

We were chasing the pirates who captured Bacchus.

*Odysseus*

What is this place? Is it inhabited?

*Silenus*

This is Etna, the highest peak in Sicily.

*Odysseus*

Where are the walls and the city-towers?

115

*Silenus*

This is no city. No man inhabits here.

*Odysseus*

Who does inhabit it? Wild animals?

*Silenus*

The Cyclopes. They live in caves, not houses.

*Odysseus*

Who governs them? Or do the people rule?

*Silenus*

They are savages. There is no government.

120

*Odysseus*

How do they live? Do they till the fields?

*Silenus*

Their whole diet is milk, cheese, and meat.

*Odysseus*

Do they grow grapes and make the vine give wine?

THE CYCLOPS

*Silenus*

No. The land is sullen. There is no dance.

*Odysseus*

Are they hospitable to strangers here? 125

*Silenus*

Strangers, they say, make excellent eating.

*Odysseus*

What? You say they feast on human flesh?

*Silenus*

Here every visitor is devoured.

*Odysseus*

Where is this Cyclops now? In the . . . house?

*Silenus*

Gone hunting on Mt. Etna with his packs. 130

*Odysseus*

What should we do to make our escape?

*Silenus*

I don't know, Odysseus. We'll do what we can.

*Odysseus*

Then sell us some bread. We have none left.

*Silenus*

There is nothing to eat, I said, except meat.

*Odysseus*

Meat is good, and it will stop our hunger. 135

*Silenus*

We do have fig-cheese. And there is milk.

*Odysseus*

Bring it out. The buyer should see what he buys.

*Silenus*

Tell me, how much are you willing to pay?

*Odysseus*

In money, nothing. But I have some . . . wine.

*Silenus*

Delicious word! How long since I've heard it.

140

*Odysseus*

Maron, son of a god, gave me this wine.

*Silenus*

Not the same lad I once reared in these arms?

*Odysseus*

The son of Bacchus himself, to be brief.

*Silenus*

Where is the wine? on board ship? you have it?

*Odysseus*

In this flask, old man. Look for yourself.

145

*Silenus*

That? That wouldn't make one swallow for me.

*Odysseus*

No? For each swallow you take, the flask gives two.

*Silenus*

A fountain among fountains, that! I *like* it.

*Odysseus*

Will you have it unwatered to start with?

THE CYCLOPS

*Silenus*

That's fair. The buyer should have a sample. 150

*Odysseus*

I have a cup here to go with the flask.

*Silenus*

Pour away. A drink will joggle my memory.

*Odysseus*

*(Unstoppers the flask, pours out a cup and waves it under Silenus' nose.)*

There you are.

*Silenus*

Mmmmmm. Gods, what a bouquet!

*Odysseus*

Can you *see* it?

*Silenus*

No, by Zeus, but I can whiff it.

*Odysseus*

Have another. Then you'll *sing* its praises. 155

*Silenus*

Mmmmmmaa. A dance for Bacchus! La de da.

*Odysseus*

Did that purl down your gullet sweetly?

*Silenus*

Right down to the tips of my toenails.

*Odysseus*

Besides the wine, we'll give you money. 160

*Silenus*

Money be damned! Just pour out the wine.

*Odysseus*

Then bring out your cheese, or some lambs.

*Silenus*

Right away.

I don't give a hoot for any master.

I would go mad for one cup of that wine!

I'd give away the herds of all the Cyclopes. 165

Once I get drunk and happy, I'd go jump

in the sea off the Leucadian rock!

The man who doesn't like to drink is mad.

Why, when you're drunk, you stand up stiff down here

(*Gestures.*)

and then get yourself a fistful of breast 170

and browse on the soft field ready to your hands.

You dance, and goodbye to troubles. Well then,

why shouldn't I adore a drink like that

and be damned to the stupid Cyclops

with his eye in the middle?

(*He enters the cave.*)

*Coryphaeus*

Listen, Odysseus, we'd like a word with you. 175

*Odysseus*

By all means. We are all friends here.

*Coryphaeus*

Did you take Helen when you took Troy?

*Odysseus*

We rooted out the whole race of Priam.

*Coryphaeus*

When you took that woman, did you all take turns

and bang her? She liked variety in men, 180

the fickle bitch! Why, the sight of a man

with embroidered pants and a golden chain

# THE CYCLOPS

so fluttered her, she left Menelaus,  
a fine little man. I wish there were  
no women in the world—except for me. 185

*(Silenus reappears from the cave, his arms loaded with  
wicker panniers of cheese; he leads some lambs.)*

*Silenus*

King Odysseus, here are some lambs for you,  
the fat of the flock, and here, a good stock  
of creamed cheeses. Take them and leave the cave 190  
as fast as you can. But first give me a drink  
of that blessed wine to seal our bargain.  
Help us! Here comes the Cyclops! What shall we do?

*Odysseus*

We're finished now, old man. Where can we run?

*Silenus*

Into the cave. You can hide in there. 195

*Odysseus*

Are you mad? Run right into the trap?

*Silenus*

No danger. The rocks are full of hiding-places.

*Odysseus*

*(Grandiloquently.)*

Never. Why, Troy itself would groan aloud  
if we ran from one man. Many's the time  
I stood off ten thousand Phrygians with my shield. 200  
If die we must, we must die with honor.  
If we live, we live with our old glory!

*(The satyrs run pell-mell around the orchestra; Silenus  
slinks into the cave. On the left appears a bearded  
man of great height. He holds a club and is followed  
by dogs.)*



*Cyclops*

Here. Here. What's going on? What's this uproar?  
 Why this Bacchic hubbub? There's no Bacchus here,  
 no bronze clackers or rattling castanets! 205  
 How are my newborn lambs in the cave?  
 Are they at the teat, nuzzling their mothers?  
 Are the wicker presses filled with fresh cheese?  
 Well? What do you say? Answer, or my club 210  
 will drub the tears out of you! Look up, not down.

*Coryphaeus*

There. We're looking right up at Zeus himself.  
 I can see Orion and all the stars.

*Cyclops*

Is my dinner cooked and ready to eat?

*Coryphaeus*

Ready and waiting. You have only to bolt it. 215

*Cyclops*

And are the vats filled up, brimming with milk?

*Coryphaeus*

You can swill a whole hogshead, if you like.

*Cyclops*

Cow's milk, or sheep's milk, or mixed?

*Coryphaeus*

Whatever you like. Just don't swallow me.

*Cyclops*

You least. I'd soon be dead if I had you 220  
 jumping through your capers in my belly.

*(He suddenly sees the Greeks standing near the cave.)*

Hey! what's that crowd I see over by the cave?  
 Have pirates or thieves taken the country?  
 Look: sheep from my fold tied up with withies! 225

THE CYCLOPS

And cheese-presses all around! And the old man  
with his bald head swollen red with bruises!

*(Silenus emerges from the cave, groaning; he is  
red-faced from the wine.)*

*Silenus*

Ohhh. I'm all on fire. They've beaten me up.

*Cyclops*

Who did? Who's been beating your head, old man?

*Silenus*

*(Indicating the Greeks.)*

They did, Cyclops. I wouldn't let them rob you. 230

*Cyclops*

Didn't they know that I am a god?

Didn't they know my ancestors were gods?

*Silenus*

I tried to tell them. But they went on robbing.

I tried to stop them from stealing your lambs

and eating your cheeses. What's more, they said

they would yoke you to a three-foot collar 235

and squeeze out your bowels through your one eye,

and scourge your backsides with a whip,

and then they were going to tie you up

and throw you on a ship and give you away

for lifting rocks or for work at a mill. 240

*Cyclops*

Is that so? Run and sharpen my cleavers.

Take a big bunch of faggots and light it.

I'll murder them right now and stuff my maw

with their meat hot from the coals. Why wait 245

to carve? I'm fed up with mountain food:

too many lions and stags and too long

since I've had a good meal of manmeat.

*Silenus*

And quite right, master. A change in diet  
is very pleasant. It's been a long time  
since we've had visitors here at the cave. 250

*Odysseus*

Cyclops, let your visitors have their say.  
We came here to your cave from our ship  
because we needed food. This fellow here 255  
sold us some lambs in exchange for wine—  
all quite voluntary, no coercion.  
There's not a healthy word in what he says;  
the fact is he was caught peddling your goods. 260

*Silenus*

I? Why, damn your soul.

*Odysseus*

If I'm lying. . . .

*Silenus*

I swear, Cyclops, by your father Poseidon,  
by Triton the great, I swear by Nereus,  
by Calypso and by Nereus' daughters,  
by the holy waves and every species of fish, 265  
I swear, dear master, sweet little Cyclops,  
I did not sell your goods to the strangers!  
If I did, then let my dear children die for it.

*Coryphaeus*

And the same to you. With these very eyes  
I saw you selling goods to the strangers. 270  
And if I'm lying, then let my father  
die for it. But don't do wrong to strangers.

*Cyclops*

You're lying. I would rather believe him

(*He indicates Silenus.*)

THE CYCLOPS

than Rhadamanthus himself. And I say  
that he's right. But I want to question you.  
Where have you come from, strangers? where to? 275  
And tell me in what city you grew up.

*Odysseus*

We are from Ithaca. After we sacked  
the city of Troy, sea-winds drove us here,  
safe and sound, to your country, Cyclops.

*Cyclops*

Was it you who sacked Troy-on-Scamander 280  
because that foul Helen was carried off?

*Odysseus*

We did. Our terrible task is done.

*Cyclops*

You ought to die for shame: to go to war  
with the Phrygians for a single woman!

*Odysseus*

A god was responsible; don't blame men. 285  
But we ask as free men, we implore you,  
do not, O noble son of the sea-god,  
murder men who come to your cave as friends.  
Do not profane your mouth by eating us.

*(He waxes rhetorical.)*

For it is we, my lord, who everywhere  
in Hellas preserved your father Poseidon 290  
in the tenure of his temples. Thanks to us,  
Taenarus' sacred harbor is inviolate;  
the peak of Sunium with its silver-lodes  
sacred to Athena, is still untouched;  
and safe, the sanctuaries of Geraestus! 295  
We did not betray Greece—perish the thought!—  
to Phrygians. And you have a share in this:

for this whole land, under volcanic Etna  
in whose depths you live, is part of Hellas.

*(The Cyclops shows disapproval.)*

In any case—and if you disagree—  
all men honor that custom whereby 300  
shipwrecked sailors are clothed and protected.  
Above all, they should not gorge your mouth and paunch,  
nor be spitted as men might spit an ox.  
The land of Priam has exhausted Greece,  
soaked up the blood of thousands killed in war: 305  
wives made widows, women without their sons,  
old men turned snow-white. If you roast the rest  
for your ungodly meal, where will Hellas turn?  
Change your mind, Cyclops! Forget your hunger! 310  
Forget this sacrilege and do what is right.  
Many have paid the price for base profits.

*Silenus*

A word of advice, Cyclops. If you eat  
all of his flesh and chew on his tongue,  
you'll become eloquent and very glib. 315

*Cyclops*

Money's the wise man's religion, little man.  
The rest is mere bluff and purple patches.  
I don't give a damn for my father's shrines  
along the coast! Why did you think I would?  
And I'm not afraid of Zeus's thunder; 320  
in fact, I don't believe Zeus is stronger  
than I am. And anyway I don't care,  
and I'll tell you why I don't care. When Zeus  
pours down rain, I take shelter in this cave  
and feast myself on roast lamb or venison. 325  
Then I stretch myself and wash down the meal,  
flooding my belly with a vat of milk.  
Then, louder than ever Zeus can thunder,  
I fart through the blankets. When the wind sweeps down

# THE CYCLOPS

with snow from Thrace, I wrap myself in furs 330  
 and light up the fire. Then let it snow  
 for all I care! Whether it wants or not,  
 the earth must grow the grass that feeds my flocks.  
 And as for sacrifices, I make mine,  
 not to the gods, but the greatest god of all, 335  
 this belly of mine! To eat, to drink  
 from day to day, to have no worries—  
 that's the real Zeus for your clever man!  
 As for those who embroider human life  
 with their little laws—damn the lot of them! 340  
 I shall go right on indulging myself—  
 by eating you. But, to be in the clear,  
 I'll be hospitable and give you fire  
 and my father's water—plus a cauldron.  
 Once it starts to boil, it will render down  
 your flesh very nicely. So, inside with you, 345  
 and gather round the altar to the god  
 of the cave, and wish him hearty eating.

*(Cyclops enters the cave, driving Odysseus' crew  
 before him.)*

*Odysseus*

Gods! Have I escaped our hardships at Troy  
 and on the seas only to be cast up  
 and wrecked on the reef of this savage heart?  
 O Pallas, lady, daughter of Zeus, now 350  
 if ever, help me! Worse than war at Troy,  
 I have come to my danger's deepest place.  
 O Zeus, god of strangers, look down on me  
 from where you sit, throned among the bright stars!  
 If you do not look down upon me now,  
 you are no Zeus, but a nothing at all! 355

*(He disappears into the cave; Silenus follows him.)*

*Chorus*

Open the vast O of your jaws, Cyclops!

# EURIPIDES

Dinner is served: the limbs of your guests,  
boiled, roasted, or broiled, ready for you  
to gnaw, rend, and chew  
while you loll on your shaggy goatskin. 360

Don't ask me to dinner. Stow that cargo  
on your own. Let me keep clear of this cave,  
well clear of the Cyclops of Etna,  
this loathsome glutton, 365  
who gorges himself on the guts of his guests!

Savage! Stranger to mercy! A monster  
who butchers his guests on his hearth,  
who boils up their flesh and bolts it, 370  
whose foul mouth munches  
on human meat plucked from the sizzling coals!

*(Odysseus appears from the cave.)*

*Odysseus*  
Zeus, how can I say what I saw in that cave? 375  
Unbelievable horrors, the kind of things  
men do in myths and plays, not in real life!

*Coryphaeus*  
Has that god-forsaken Cyclops butchered  
your crew? Tell us what happened, Odysseus.

*Odysseus*  
He snatched up two of my men, the soundest  
and heaviest. He weighed them in his hands. 380

*Coryphaeus*  
How horrible! How could you stand to watch?

*Odysseus*  
First, after we had entered the cave,  
he lit a fire and tossed down on the huge hearth  
logs from a vast oak—you would have needed

# THE CYCLOPS

three wagons merely to carry the load. 385  
 Then he pulled his pallet of pine-needles  
 close to the fire. After he milked the sheep,  
 he filled a hundred-gallon vat with milk.  
 By his side, he put an ivy-wood box,  
 nearly four feet in width and six feet deep. 390  
 Next he put a cauldron of brass to boil  
 on the fire, and beside it thorn-wood spits  
 whose points had been sharpened in the coals  
 and the rest trimmed down with an axe. There were  
 bowls for catching blood, big as Etna,  
 and set flush against the blade of the axe. 395  
 Well, when this damned cook of Hades was ready,  
 he snatched up two of my men. With one blow  
 he slit the throat of one over the lip  
 of the brass cauldron. Holding the other  
 by the heels, he slammed him against a rock 400  
 and bashed out his brains. Then he hacked away  
 the flesh with his terrible cleaver  
 and put the pieces to roast on the coals.  
 The leftovers he tossed in the pot to boil.  
 With the tears streaming down, I went up close 405  
 and waited on the Cyclops. The others,  
 their faces ashen, huddled up like birds  
 in the crannies of the rocks. Then he leaned back,  
 bloated with his awful meal on my men,  
 and let out a staggering belch. Just then 410  
 some god sent me a marvelous idea!  
 I filled a cup and gave him Maron's wine  
 to drink. "Cyclops," I said, "son of the sea-god,  
 see what a heavenly drink yield the grapes  
 of Greece, the gladness of Dionysus!" 415  
 Glutted with his dreadful meal, he took it  
 and drained it off at one gulp, then lifted  
 his hands in thanks: "You are the best of guests!  
 You have given me a noble drink to crown  
 a noble meal." When I saw how pleased he was, 420  
 I poured him another, knowing the wine



would quickly fuddle him and pay him back.  
 Then he started to sing. I poured one drink  
 after another and warmed his belly.  
 So there he is, inside, singing away 425  
 while my crew wails; you can hear the uproar.  
 I slipped quietly out. Now, if you agree,  
 I'd like to save myself and you as well.  
 So tell me, yes or no, whether you want  
 to escape this monster and live with the nymphs 430  
 in the halls of Bacchus. Your father in there  
 agrees, but he's weak and loves his liquor.  
 He's stuck to the cup as though it were glue,  
 and can't fly. But you are young, so follow me  
 and save yourselves; find again your old friend,  
 Dionysus, so different from this Cyclops! 435

*Coryphaeus*

My good friend, if only we might see that day  
 when we escape at last this godless Cyclops!

(*Showing his phallus.*)

This poor hose has been a bachelor  
 a long time now. But we can't eat the Cyclops *back*! 440

*Odysseus*

Listen to my plan for setting you free  
 and our revenge upon this loathsome beast.

*Coryphaeus*

Tell on. I would rather hear tell of his death  
 than hear all the harps in Asia play.

*Odysseus*

He is so delighted with Bacchus' drink  
 he wants to carouse with his relatives. 445

*Coryphaeus*

I see. You'll set an ambush in the woods  
 and kill him—or push him over a cliff.

*Odysseus*

No, I had something more subtle in mind.

*Coryphaeus*

I thought from the first you were sly. What then? 450

*Odysseus*

I hope to stop his going on this spree  
by saying he shouldn't give his wine away,  
but keep it for himself and live in bliss.  
Then, as soon as the wine puts him to sleep,  
I'll take my sword and sharpen up the trunk 455  
of an olive tree I saw inside the cave.  
I'll put it in the coals and when it's caught,  
I'll shove it home, dead in the Cyclops' eye,  
and blind him. Just like a timber-fitter  
whirling his auger around with a belt, 460  
I'll screw the brand in his eye, round and round,  
scorch out his eyeball and blind him for good.

*Coryphaeus*

Bravo! I'm for your plan with all my heart. 465

*Odysseus*

And finally, my friends, I'll embark you  
and your old father aboard my black ship  
and sail full speed away from this place.

*Coryphaeus*

May I lend a hand at this ritual?  
Help hold the pole when you put out his eye? 470  
This is one sacrifice I want to share.

*Odysseus*

You must. The brand is huge. You all must lift.

*Coryphaeus*

I could shoulder a hundred wagon-loads

so long as Cyclops died a wretched death!  
We'll smoke out his eye like a hornets' nest. 475

*Odysseus*

Be quiet now. You know my stratagem.  
When I give the word, obey your leaders.  
I refuse to save myself and leave my men  
trapped inside. I could, of course, escape:  
here I am, outside. But I have no right 480  
to abandon my crew and save myself alone.

*(He enters the cave.)*

*Chorus*

Who'll be first along the brand? Who next?  
We'll shove it square in the Cyclops' eye!  
We'll rip away his sight. 485

Quiet.  
Shhhh.

*(Polyphemus appears from the cave flanked by  
Odysseus and Silenus. Odysseus carries  
the flask and cup, while Silenus holds  
a pitcher and a mixing-bowl.)*

Here he comes, flat, off-key drunkard,  
reeling out of his home in the rock, 490  
braying some wretched tune. Ha!  
We'll give him lessons in carousing!

*(Polyphemus stumbles blindly about.)*

A little while: then, perfect blindness!

*First semichorus*

Happy the man who cries *Evohé!*  
stretched out full length and making merry, 495  
for whom the wine keeps flowing,  
whose arms are open to his friend!  
Lucky man, upon whose bed there blows

# THE CYCLOPS

the soft bloom of a lovely girl 500  
with gleaming hair, sweet with oil!  
who cries: "Who'll open me the door?"

## *Cyclops*

Mamama. Am I crammed with wine!  
How I love the fun of a feast!  
The hold of my little dory 505  
is stuffed right up to the gunwales!  
This marvelous meal reminds me:  
I should go feast in the soft spring  
with my brothers, the Cyclopes.  
Here, here, my friend, hand me the flask. 510

## *Second semichorus*

O the flash of a handsome Eye!  
Handsome himself comes from his house,  
Handsome the groom, Handsome the lover!  
A soft bride burns for this groom; 515  
she burns in the cool of the cave!  
And soon we shall wreath his head  
with a wreath of reddest flowers!

## *Odysseus*

Listen, Cyclops. I've spent a lot of time  
with this drink of Bacchus I gave you. 520

## *Cyclops*

What sort of god is this Bacchus held to be?

## *Odysseus*

Best of all in blessing the lives of men.

## *Cyclops*

(*Belching.*)

At least he makes very tasty belching.

## *Odysseus*

That's the kind of god he is: hurts no one.

*Cyclops*

How can a god bear to live in a flask? 525

*Odysseus*

Wherever you put him, he's quite content.

*Cyclops*

Gods shouldn't shut themselves up in wine-skins.

*Odysseus*

What matter, if you like him? Does the flask irk you?

*Cyclops*

I loathe the flask. The wine is what I like.

*Odysseus*

Then you should stay here and enjoy yourself. 530

*Cyclops*

Shouldn't I share the wine with my brothers?

*Odysseus*

Keep it to yourself; you'll be more esteemed.

*Cyclops*

But I'd be more useful if I shared it.

*Odysseus*

Yes, but carousing often ends in fights.

*Cyclops*

I'm so drunk nothing could hurt me now. 535

*Odysseus*

My dear man, drunkards ought to stay at home.

*Cyclops*

But the man's a fool who drinks by himself.

THE CYCLOPS

*Odysseus*

It's the wise man who stays home when he's drunk.

*Cyclops*

What should we do, Silenus? Should I stay home?

*Silenus*

I would. Why do we want more drinkers, Cyclops? 540

*Cyclops*

(*Yawning.*)

Anyway, the ground is soft and the flowers. . . .

*Silenus*

There's nothing like a drink when the sun is hot.

Lie down there; stretch yourself out on the ground.

(*Cyclops obediently lies down, and furtively Silenus  
puts the bowl behind his back.*)

*Cyclops*

There. Why did you put the bowl behind my back? 545

*Silenus*

Someone might tip it over.

*Cyclops*

You wanted

to steal a drink. Put it in the middle.

You there, stranger, tell me what your name is.

*Odysseus*

"Nobody" is my name. But how will you reward me?

*Cyclops*

I will eat you the last of all your crew. 550

*Silenus*

That's a fine gift to give your guest, Cyclops.

(*He quickly drains cup.*)

*Cyclops*

What are you doing? Drinking on the sly?

*Silenus*

The wine kissed me—for my beautiful eyes.

*Cyclops*

Watch out. You love the wine; it doesn't love you.

*Silenus*

Yes, by Zeus, it has a passion for my good looks.

555

*Cyclops*

Here, pour me a cupful. But just *pour* it.

*Silenus*

How is it mixed? Let me taste and see.

*(He takes a quick pull.)*

*Cyclops*

Damnation! give it here.

*Silenus*

By Zeus, not before

I see you crowned—

*(He offers Cyclops a wreath of flowers.)*  
and have another drink.

*(He empties the cup.)*

*Cyclops*

This wine-pourer is a cheat!

560

*Silenus*

Not at all.

The wine's so good it slides down by itself.

Now wipe yourself off before you drink again.

*Cyclops*

*(Wiping his face and beard.)*

There. My mouth is clean and so is my beard.

THE CYCLOPS

*Silenus*

Then crook your arm—gracefully now—and drink,  
just as you see me drink—and now you don't.

*(He drains cup.)*

*Cyclops*

Here! What are you doing?

565

*Silenus*

Guzzling sweetly.

*Cyclops*

*(Snatching away the cup and handing it to Odysseus.)*

Here, stranger. Take the flask and pour for me.

*Odysseus*

At least the wine feels at home in my hand.

*Cyclops*

Come on, *pour!*

*Odysseus*

*I am pouring. Just be still.*

*Cyclops*

That's not so easy when you're in your cups.

*Odysseus*

There, take it up and drink down every drop,  
and don't say die until the wine is gone.

570

*Cyclops*

Mama. What a wizard the vine must be!

*Odysseus*

If you drench yourself on a full stomach  
and swill your belly full, you'll sleep deep.  
If you leave any, Bacchus will shrivel you up.

575

*Cyclops*

*(Reeling.)*

Whoosh! I can scarcely swim out of this flood.



Pure pleasure! Ohhh. Earth and sky going round,  
all mixed up together! Look: I can see  
the throne of Zeus and the holy glory 580  
of the gods.

*(The satyrs dance around him suggestively.)*

No, I couldn't make love to you!  
The Graces tempt me! My Ganymede here  
*(He grabs Silenus.)*

is good enough for me. With him I'll sleep  
magnificently. By these Graces, I will!  
And anyway, I prefer boys to girls.

*Silenus*

Am I Zeus' little Ganymede, Cyclops? 585

*Cyclops*

You are, by Zeus! The boy I stole from Dardanos!

*Silenus*

I'm done for, children. Foul things await me.

*Cyclops*

Sneer at your lover, do you, because he's drunk?

*Silenus*

It's a bitter wine I'll have to drink now.  
*(Cyclops drags off Silenus protesting into the cave.)*

*Odysseus*

To work, you noble sons of Dionysus! 590  
Our man's inside the cave. In a short while  
his belly will heave its foul meal of flesh.  
Look, the brand has begun to smoke inside.  
We prepared it for just this: to smoke out  
the Cyclops' eye. Now you must act like men. 595

*Coryphaeus*

Our will is made of unbreakable rock.

## THE CYCLOPS

But hurry inside before *that* happens  
to my father. All is ready out here.

*Odysseus*

(*Prays.*)

O Hephaestus, ruler over Etna,  
free yourself from this vile neighbor of yours!  
Sear out his bright eye at one blow! O Sleep, 600  
child of black Night, leap with all your might  
on this god-detested beast! And do not,  
after our glorious trials at Troy,  
betray Odysseus and his crew to death  
from a man who cares for neither man nor god. 605  
If you do, we will make a goddess of Chance,  
and count her higher than all the other gods!

(*He disappears into the cave.*)

*Chorus*

Grim tongs shall clutch by the throat  
this beast who bolts down his guests.  
Fire shall quench the fire of his eye. 610  
The brand, big as a tree, already waits,  
waits in the coals. 615

On, wine, to your work!  
Rip out the eye of this raving Cyclops!  
Make him regret the day he drank you!  
What I want with all my soul to see  
is Bacchus, the god who loves the ivy! 620  
Shall I ever see that day?

(*Odysseus reappears from the cave.*)

*Odysseus*

Quiet, you dogs! By the gods, be quiet!  
Hold your tongues. I don't want a man of you  
to wink or clear his throat or even breathe. 625  
If we wake up that scourge of evil,  
we won't be able to sear out his eye.

E U R I P I D E S

*(The satyrs freeze into silence. The following  
dialogue is conducted entirely in whispers.)*

*Coryphaeus*

We are quiet. Our mouths are locked up tight.

*Odysseus*

To work then. And grab the brand with both hands 630  
when you enter the cave. The point is red-hot.

*Coryphaeus*

You should tell us our stations. Who'll be first  
on the blazing pole? And then we can all  
take our part in searing out the Cyclops' eye.

*First parastate*

Where we stand, over here by the entrance, 635  
we're too far away to reach his eye.

*Second parastate*

*(Limping in pain.)*

And just this minute we've gone lame.

*First parastate*

And we have too. While we were standing here  
we sprained our ankles, I don't know how.

*Odysseus*

Sprained your ankles, standing still? 640

*Second parastate*

And my eyes  
are full of dust and ashes from somewhere.

*Odysseus*

What cowards! I won't get any help from you.

*Coryphaeus*

And because I feel for my back and spine

## THE CYCLOPS

and don't want to have my teeth knocked out,  
I'm a coward, am I? But I can say 645  
a fine Orphic spell that will make the brand  
fly of its own accord into the skull  
of this one-eyed whelp of Earth and scorch him up.

*Odysseus*

I knew from that first what sort you were,  
and now I know it better. If you're too weak 650  
to lend a hand, at least cheer on my men  
and put some heart in them by shouting.

*(He enters the cave.)*

*Coryphaeus*

We'll shout and this "Nobody" will run the risks.  
We'll fuddle the Cyclops with our shouting. 655

*Chorus*

*(Dancing excitedly, shouting at the top of its lungs,  
and imitating the action taking place in the cave.)*

Go! Go! As hard as you can!  
Push! Thrust! Faster! Burn off  
the lashes of the guest-eater!  
Smoke him out, burn him out,  
the shepherd of Etna! 660  
Twist it! Turn! Careful:  
he is hurt and desperate.

*(A great shriek from within the cave.)*

*Cyclops*

Owwooooo! My eye is scorched to ashes! 665

*Coryphaeus*

Oh song of songs! Sing it for me, Cyclops!

*Cyclops*

Owwoo! They've murdered me! I'm finished!  
But you won't escape this cave to enjoy

E U R I P I D E S

your triumph, you contemptible nothings.  
I'll stand at the entrance and block it—so.

*(Polyphemus appears at the threshold of the cave and  
stretches his arms across it; his face  
streams with blood.)*

*Coryphaeus*

What's the matter, Cyclops?

*Cyclops*

I'm dying.

*Coryphaeus*

You look terrible.

*Cyclops*

I feel terrible.

670

*Coryphaeus*

Were you so drunk you fell in the fire?

*Cyclops*

"Nobody" wounded me.

*Coryphaeus*

Then you're not hurt.

*Cyclops*

"Nobody" blinded me.

*Coryphaeus*

Then you're not blind.

*Cyclops*

Blind as you.

*Coryphaeus*

How could nobody make you blind?

*Cyclops*

You mock me. Where is "Nobody"?

675

THE CYCLOPS

*Coryphaeus*

Nowhere.

*Cyclops*

It's the stranger I mean, you fool, the one  
who stuffed me full of wine and did me in.

*Coryphaeus*

*(Sententiously.)*

Wine is tricky; very hard to wrestle with.

*Cyclops*

By the gods, has he escaped or is he inside?

*Coryphaeus*

There they are, standing quiet over there,  
under cover of the rock.

680

*Cyclops*

On which side?

*Coryphaeus*

On your right.

*(Cyclops leaves the entrance and stumbles with out-  
stretched hands toward the right. Meanwhile  
the Greeks steal out of the cave.)*

*Cyclops*

Where?

*Coryphaeus*

Over against the rock.

Do you have them?

*Cyclops*

*(Running into a jutting rock.)*

Ouf! Trouble on trouble.

I've split my head.

*Coryphaeus*

And now they've escaped you.

*Cyclops*

This way, did you say?

*Coryphaeus*

No, the other way.

*Cyclops*

Which way?

*Coryphaeus*

Turn around. There. On your left.

685

*Cyclops*

You're laughing at me in my misery.

*Coryphaeus*

Not now. There he is in front of you.

*Cyclops*

Where are you, demon?

*(The Greeks stand at the entrance on the right, a  
whole length of the stage away from Cyclops.)*

*Odysseus*

Out of your reach,

Looking after the safety of Odysseus.

690

*Cyclops*

What? A new name? Have you changed your name?

*Odysseus*

Odysseus: the name my father gave me.

You have had to pay for your unholy meal.

I would have done wrong to have fired Troy

but not revenge the murder of my men.

695

*Cyclops*

Ah! The old oracle has been fulfilled.

It said that after you had come from Troy,

you would blind me. But you would pay for this,

it said, and wander the seas for many years.

700

THE CYCLOPS

*Odysseus*

Much I care! What's done is done. As for me,  
I'm off to the shore where I'll launch my ship  
on the Sicilian shore and sail for home.

*(Exit.)*

*Cyclops*

Not yet. I'll rip a boulder from this cliff  
and crush you and all your crew beneath it.  
Blind I may be, but I'll reach the mountain-top  
soon enough through the tunnel in the cave.

705

*(Exits into cave.)*

*Chorus*

We'll enlist in the crew of Odysseus.  
From now our orders come from Bacchus.





# HERACLES

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

WILLIAM ARROWSMITH



## INTRODUCTION TO HERACLES

The *Heracles* of Euripides is seldom assigned a high place in the corpus of extant tragedy. If no one any longer quite accepts Swinburne's description of the play as a "grotesque abortion," the reason is less real disagreement than a habit of respect for the author, supported by a cautious intuition of the play's extraordinary power. Of caution there should be no question. However dislocated in structure the *Heracles* may be, its dramatic power and technical virtuosity are unmistakable. With the possible exception of the *Bacchae*, there is no play into which Euripides has put more of himself and his mature poetic skills than this one. In scene after scene one senses that sureness of movement and precise control of passion which come only with the dramatist's full mastery of his medium. One thinks first of the staggering brutality and shock which erupts in the madness scene, a brutality made all the more terrible by the tenderness which precedes it; or of the great dirge which celebrates the labors of Heracles, and then the confrontation of that ode with the hero's simple "Farewell, my labors"; or, again, of the exquisite ode in praise of youth and the service of the Muses, poetry tense with the full pressure of the poet's life behind it; and, last of all, that anguished exchange between Theseus and Heracles in which the hero, broken by his suffering, weak, reduced to his final humanity, comes on his greatest heroism, surely one of the most poignant codas in Greek tragedy.

Technically, at least, it is a brilliant performance, boldness of dramatic stroke and vigor of invention everywhere visible, but particularly in the brisk counterpoint of peripeties on

which the tragedy turns, wheeling over and over as one action pivots to its opposite, or, juxtaposed against a sudden illumination, is as suddenly shattered and annulled. Through theme after theme, with perfect tact of tempo and placing, the reversals crowd, taking each motif a further turn of the wheel. Thus the first action of the play, slow, conventional, overwhelmed by the weakness of its characters, creates out of desperation a sudden and time-honored theodicy. The wheel turns, and a violent irruption of the irrational smashes all theodicy; then, in the last swing, both irrational and theodicy are alike undone in the hero's enormous leap to an illusion of order in divinity, an assertion which he maintains squarely in the teeth of his experience. The savior who suddenly turns destroyer is in turn saved from self-destruction by the man he had earlier saved from Hades. The hero is reduced to his humanity as the condition of his heroism. Throughout the tragedy, gathering momentum by contrast, runs the rhythm of its minor terms: first despair, then hope, then again despair, and finally an endurance deeper than either; age and youth, weakness and strength, both pairs resolved in the condition that makes them one. Schematic, brilliant, savagely broken, the *Heracles* is a play of great power and, with the exception of the *Orestes*, the most violent structural tour-de-force in Greek tragedy.

It is this very dislocation, this virtuosity and violence in the play's structure, which more than anything else has injured its reputation and hindered reappraisal. Given Aristotelian standards of judgment (and Aristotle even today affects dramatic criticism at a profound level), the play's dislocation could not but appear either pointless or gratuitous; for at almost every conceivable point the play is in flat contradiction to the principles of the *Poetics*. Thus *Heracles* has no visible *hamartia*; if he falls, he falls for no flaw of his own nature or failure of judgment, but as the innocent victim of divine brutality. And still worse, the play exhibits not at all that deep, necessitous *propter hoc* connection between its parts, which for Aristotle constituted the right structure of tragedy.<sup>1</sup> With almost one

1. *Poetics* 1452<sup>a</sup>. 20.

voice both critics and scholars from Aristotle to the present have reported the dislocation of the play as an insuperable blemish. The *Heracles*, they say, is "broken-backed,"<sup>2</sup> a tragedy that "falls so clearly into two parts that we cannot view it as a work of art."<sup>3</sup> But in so saying, they report, I think, as much their own outraged Aristotelianism as the obvious facts of the play's structure.

Beyond question the play falls starkly into two discrete but continuous actions, and between these two actions there is neither causal necessity nor even probability: the second action follows but by no means arises out of the first. Through the close of the chorus which celebrates the slaying of Lycus (l. 814), we have one complete action as conventional in movement as it is in subject: a familiar tableau of suppliants, their cruel antagonist, an *agôn* in which the tormentor is slain by the savior, and a closing hymn in praise of the hero and the vindicated justice of the gods. This melodramatic action is shattered by the appearance of Madness and Iris, and the play, in violation of all probability, careens around to commence a wholly new action. Utterly unexpected and without causal ground in the first part of the play, the madness of Heracles and the murder of his wife and children are simply set down in glaring contrast to the preceding action. Against theodicy is put the hideous proof of divine injustice; against the greatness and piety and *aretê* of Heracles in the first action is placed the terrible reward of heroism in the second; against the asserted peace and calm and domestic tenderness which closes the first action is set the utter annihilation of all moral order in the second. The result is a structure in which two apparently autonomous actions are jammed savagely against each other in almost total contradiction, with no attempt to minimize or even modulate the profound formal rift.

That rift is, of course, deliberate; nothing, in fact, has been omitted which might support the effect of total shock in this reversal. Moreover, even a cursory review of the material which Euripides used for his tragedy shows how carefully that ma-

2. Gilbert Murray, *Greek Studies*, p. 112.

3. Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy*, p. 229.

terial has been ordered to effect, rather than obviate, this dislocation of structure.

Old tradition told of Hera's persecution of Heracles because of her jealousy of Zeus' amour with Heracles' mother, Alcmena. It also told how Heracles, driven mad by Hera, slew his sons and would also have killed his father, Amphitryon, had not Athene intervened and knocked the raging hero unconscious with a stone. For the most part Euripides has retained these traditions, but with this great difference: whereas in the common tradition the great labors of Heracles were undertaken in penance for the murder of the children, Euripides has transposed the murders to the time just after the completion of the labors, the height of Heracles' career. Because Heracles at the very moment of his fall is at his greatest, the hideousness of Hera's revenge is sharply underscored and its abrupt, tragic senselessness stressed. The dramatist, that is, has ordered his material in such a way as to achieve precisely that dislocation which the play's structure exhibits. Nor is this all. Because Euripides has transposed the labors and the murders, he has been forced to invent a new motive for the labors. This is the motive of filial piety: Heracles undertook his labors in order to win back the country from which Amphitryon had been exiled for the murder of Electryon. Thus at the same time that Euripides freely invents in order to fill the gap caused by the original transposition, he also subtly humanizes his hero in preparation for the conversion which is the heart of the second action.

Tradition also told of Heracles' suicide on Mt. Oeta (cf. Sophocles' *Trachiniae*) and how after death the hero was translated to heaven and given everlasting youth in the person of Hebe. This entire saga is suppressed in the Euripidean version, but the very fact of its suppression informs the *Heracles* throughout, pointing up the direction of the action against what has been excluded. Thus Heracles, far from being deified in Euripides, is humanized<sup>4</sup> as the condition of his heroism.

4. In the humanization of Heracles, Euripides returns to the oldest of all extant Heracles traditions, the Homeric, in which Heracles too had to die. Cf. *Iliad* xviii. 115 ff.: "Not even the great Heracles

And far from committing suicide, the Euripidean Heracles discovers his greatest nobility in refusing to die and choosing life. If, again in the older tradition, Heracles married Hebe (i.e., youth) and so won everlasting life, in the Euripidean play Hebe is present to the action as nothing more than an impossible anguished reminder of mortal necessity and the haunting image of what in a universe not fatally flawed might have been the reward of human virtue (cf. 637-72). Similarly, the suppression of the deification motif sharpens the courageous endurance of mankind under its necessities in contrast with the happiness of the amoral gods. Deification is replaced by the closest thing to Olympus this world can offer—honored asylum at Athens. For this reason Theseus is introduced as the representative of Athenian humanity to rescue and annex to Athens the greatest Dorian hero.

By deployment of his material Euripides has structured his play into two parallel actions divided by a peripety whose purpose is more to stress the break than to bridge it. If the *Heracles* is broken, the dislocation is at least deliberate, and as such it is clearly consistent with Euripides' practice elsewhere: in the two actions of the *Hecuba*, the double plot of the *Hippolytus*, the episodic *Trojan Women* or *Phoenissae*, the broken *Andromache*, and the dislocated *Electra*. But even more violently than these plays the *Heracles* insists on the irreparable rift in its structure and invites us by its great power to discover what nonetheless makes it one play. It is right that our perception of power in literature should lead us more deeply into the order and disorder created or invoked.

Despite the fact that the first action is entirely free invention, it is important to see how conventional the treatment is. In the shaping of the characters, in their attributes and motives, in the theology and received values to which the action appeals, convention is everywhere visible. Character is essen-

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escaped death, though he was dear to the lord Zeus, the son of Cronus, but the common fate brought him down, and the grievous wrath of Hera." In literature of the historical period this tradition has almost everywhere been eclipsed by the deified Heracles, a version which begins also with Homer (cf. *Odyssey* xi. 601 ff.).



tially static, the action as a whole leached of any really tragic movement. All the emotional stops of a melodramatic situation have been pulled: we move from the despair of the helpless family to the sudden coming of the savior hero to the triumphant final diapason of vindicated divine justice. The characters are only lightly dubbed in, certainly no more so than is necessary to maintain the illusion that these are real people in a situation of unqualified peril. If the action is not quite trite, it is at least customary and predictable, so predictable in fact that it might be regarded as a parody of a standard tragic movement. Certainly no one familiar with Euripides' practice can doubt that the comfortable theodicy which closes the action has been written tongue-in-cheek or is somehow surely riding for a fall. And insensibly the impression of purely tragic power in the second action, although based on an analogous plot, undercuts the first action and exposes its conventionality.

What is true of the first action as a whole is also true of the Heracles of the first action. The traditional *données* which compose his figure have for the most part been carefully preserved; if Heracles is not here the befeater of comedy or the ruddy sensualist of the *Alcestis*, he is recognizably the familiar culture-hero of Dorian and Boeotian tradition: strong, courageous, noble, self-sufficient, carrying on his back all the aristocratic *aretē* of the moralized tradition of Pindar. Thus the grossnesses or cruelties or philandering which tradition sometimes ascribed to him (cf. again the *Trachiniae*) have been stripped away. In domestic life he is a devoted son, a loyal husband, and a fond father; in civil life he is the just king, the enemy of *hybris*, the champion of the helpless, and the loyal servant of the gods. His civilizing labors on behalf of mankind are accepted as literal truths, and the curious ambiguity in tradition which made Heracles the son of two fathers, Zeus and Amphitryon, is maintained. His heroism is based upon his strength and is essentially outward, but nonetheless valid, or at least valid enough for the muted reality of the first action.

Against this background, the second action breaks with tragic force and striking transformations, showing first the

conquering hero, the *kallinikos*, reduced to tears, helpless, dependent, and in love, stripped of that outward strength which until now had exempted him from normal human necessity, and discovering both his common ground with men and a new internalized moral courage. This Heracles is not merely untraditional; he is almost inconceivable in traditional perspective, and he is tragic where the earlier Heracles was merely noble. The point to be insisted upon here is the distance at every point between the two actions. We have here moved a whole world away from the simple virtues and theodicy of the first action, as the new role and courage of the hero undercut everything the play has created up to now. The world of the given, the reality of "things as they are said to be," withers and is replaced, not by a mere contradiction, but by a new tragic myth invoking new values and grounded in a sterner reality. What audience, especially a Greek one, could have recognized in that broken, almost domestic, Heracles fighting back his tears, the familiar and austere culture-hero of received tradition?

We have, then, two savagely different actions, one conventional and the other set in a world where tradition is dumb and conduct uncharted, placed harshly in contrast. The peripety which separates them is the dramatist's means of expressing symbolically the fatal disorder of the moral universe, and also the device by which the heroism of the second action is forced up, through an utter transformation of assumed reality. The whole play exhibits, as though on two plateaus, a *conversion* of reality. A story or legend derived from received beliefs—the world of myth and the corpus of "things as they are said to be"—is suddenly in all of its parts, terms, characters, and the values it invokes *converted* under dramatic pressure to another phase of reality. What we get is something like a dramatic mutation of received reality, and the leap the play makes between the phases or plateaus of its two realities is meant to correspond in force and vividness and apparent unpredictability to mutations in the physical world. It is this violence in the conversion of reality that explains the wrenching dislocation of Euripidean drama from an Aris-

totelian point of view and the lack of apparent connection between the parts of the play. The play pivots on two seemingly incompatible realities, and if it insists on the greater reality of what has been created over what has been received, it does so, not by denying reality to received reality, but by subtly displacing it in the transfiguration of its terms.

Thus, point for point in the *Heracles*, each of the terms—the qualities, situation, characters—that was appropriate to the Heracles of tradition is transformed and displaced. If in the first action both Zeus and Amphytrion are the fathers of Heracles, in the second action Amphytrion becomes Heracles' "real" father, not by the fact of conception, but by the greater fact of love, *philia*. In the first action Heracles literally descended to a literal Hades; in the second action this literal descent is transfigured in the refusal to die and the courage which, under an intolerable necessity, perseveres. There is a hint, moreover, that the old Hades of the poets with its Cerberus, Sisyphus, and torments is transformed in the second part into the Hades within, here and now, internalized as Heracles himself declares, "And I am like Ixion, forever chained to a flying wheel." So too the old labors appear to be replaced by the metaphorical sense of the imposed labors of human life and the cost of civilization, while the goddess Hera, who in legend made Heracles mad, passes almost insensibly into a hovering symbol of all those irrational and random necessities which the Greek and the play call *Tyche*, and which we limply translate as "Fortune" or "necessity."

All of these conversions replace and dislodge the reality of the first action by transfiguring it at every point. The first action in the light of the second is neither false nor unreal, but inadequate. Through the force of contrast with its own conversion, it comes to seem obsolete, naïve, or even humdrum, much as fresh conviction formed under *peine forte et dure* insensibly makes the conviction it replaces callow or jejune in comparison. Under the changed light of experience and the pattern it imposes, what was once taken for reality comes to seem illusion at best: true while held as true, but with widened experience, discovered inadequate. What we see is less

the contradiction between the two opposed realities than the counterpointed relation of their development, the way in which, under the blow of suffering and insight, one reality is made to yield a further one, each geared to its appropriate experience. We begin with a familiar and conventional world, operating from familiar motives among accepted though outmoded values; by the time the play closes, characters, motives, and values have all been pushed to the very frontiers of reality.

But if in this context of conversion the conventional first action is undercut and dislodged by the tragic second action, the first action also helps to inform the second and to anticipate its discoveries. Thus Heracles' desperation after his madness is paralleled by his family's desperation in the first part; what they say and do there is meant to be applied with full force to his situation later. If courage for them lies in the nobility with which they accept the necessity of death, nobility for Heracles lies in the courage with which he accepts his life as his necessity, for, in Amphitryon's words:

To persevere, trusting in what hopes he has,  
is courage in a man. The coward despairs [ll. 105-6].

If Amphitryon in the first action possesses a "useless" life (l. 42) by virtue of extreme old age and weakness, Heracles later comes to possess the same "useless" life (l. 1302), and so both meet on the grounds of their common condition. Similarly the chorus speaks of its own necessity, old age, as "a weight more heavy than Aetna's rocks, / hiding in darkness / the light of my eyes" (ll. 639-41); that same darkness, not as age but as grief, lies later on the eyes of Heracles (ll. 1140, 1159, 1198, 1104-5, 1216, 1226 ff.), the dark night of his soul. And just as the chorus in the first action finds the hope of its life in poetry and perseveres in the Muses' service, so Theseus uncovers Heracles to the sun and shows him the hope in *philia* which enables him to live. So too when Heracles, self-sufficient and independent, leads his children into the palace before his madness, he draws them behind him like little boats in tow (*epholkidās*); but at the end of the play Heracles, broken,

in love and dependent, follows in Theseus' wake to Athens like a little boat in tow (*epholkides*). The same implicit counterpoint between the two actions explains in part, I think, the unqualified villainy of Lycus. Balancing the corruption of human power and brutality (*amathia*) in him, comes the abuse of divine power in Hera—a far more heinous abuse, since divine cruelty is a fortiori worse than human brutality. Beyond this, I suspect, we are intended to see correspondence again in the physical death which Lycus meets at Heracles' hands and the spiritual annihilation of Hera which is the consequence of Heracles' great speech on the gods (ll. 1340–46). But throughout the play, in metaphor, in contrast of whole scenes, in visual imagery, the two actions are paralleled at point after point. Below the level of the violent structural dislocation of the play runs a constant crisscross of reference, comment, and contrast throwing single words or themes into sharp relief in continuous qualification of the whole action. In the perception of this continuous conversion of the play's terms lies the understanding of its movement and unity.

Point by point the deepest motive of the play is to bring Heracles to the place where he shares for the first time common ground with the others, all of whom, like him, are laid under the heavy yoke of necessity but lack that enormous physical strength which has hitherto exempted him. But if he must come to share that yoke with them, if he is reduced to his humanity as the condition of the only heroism that counts, he also comes to know for the first time that other, and redeeming, yoke of love, *philia*, which alone makes necessity endurable. For the *Heracles* is a play which imposes suffering upon men as their tragic condition, but it also discovers a courage equal to that necessity, a courage founded on love. We witness in the play a conversion of heroism whose model is Heracles, and the heart of that conversion lies in the hero's passage in suffering from the outworn courage of outward physical strength to a new internal courage, without exemption now but with the addition of love and perseverance against an intolerable necessity..

Love is the hope, the *elpis*, which permits him to endure,

and his discovery of that hope keeps step with his knowledge of anguish. He survives by virtue of love, for love lies close to, if it does not usurp, the instinct for survival. At the close of the play we see Heracles assert the dignity of his grief against the reproaches of a Theseus who, for all his generosity, is still rooted in the old heroism and no longer understands. Having claimed the dignity of his new courage, Heracles can without weakness or loss of tragic stature make plain the wreck of his life and his own dependent helplessness: strong but also weak, in need and in love, a hero at every point.

Heracles comes through suffering, then, to occupy the ground where Megara, Amphitryon, and the chorus stood earlier. Their nobility provides a standard by which to measure his heroism, first challenging it and then being surpassed by it. But nothing in Heracles is diminished because Megara and Amphitryon have set the example he must follow, and know already what he must learn. Their very weakness has set them close to necessity, while Heracles' *aretē* has been so prodigiously developed toward physical strength that nothing short of the greatest moral courage is required for him to survive his necessity. He rises and keeps on rising to his sufferings with an enormous range of spirit that in the end leaves even the unconventional Theseus far behind him. It is this ability to rise that makes him great as much as the overwhelming anguish of the necessity that confronts him. What counts in the end is not the disparity between Heracles' courage and necessity and the courage of the others, but the fact that they all—Megara, Amphitryon, the chorus, and Heracles—meet on the common ground of their condition and discover both courage and hope in the community of weakness and love.

What, finally, are we to make of Hera and that crucial speech of Heracles on the nature of the gods (ll. 1340-46)? That it was Hera who made Heracles mad was, as we have seen, an essential part of Euripides' legendary material. But the consequence of Heracles' speech is apparently to deny that the actions of the gods could in fact be such as they are dramatized to be. Alternatively Heracles appears to deny the reality of the experience out of which he makes the speech in the first

place. For to say that "if god is truly god, then he is perfect, / lacking nothing" is clearly to invalidate Hera's claim to divinity, or to deny his own experience of Hera's hatred.

The sentiment is, to be sure, Euripidean, a familiar refusal to believe the old legends which represent the gods as subject to human passions, and a discountenance of the familiar fifth-century notion that immoral conduct could be sanctioned by an appeal to divine conduct as recounted in poetry. But merely because the lines are Euripidean in thought, their effect for the play should not be glozed away as mere inconsistencies or as an undramatic intrusion of the dramatist *in propria persona*. For to say that divine adultery, tyranny, and misconduct are all "the wretched tales of poets" is a direct and unmistakable challenge not only to the Hera of the play, but to the whole Olympian system.

The consequences of Heracles' words for the play are, I suggest, this: that the story of Hera's action as dramatized is true enough, but the Hera who afflicts Heracles as she does thereby renounces any claim to the kind of divinity which Heracles asserts. This conclusion is, I think, supported by Euripides' practice elsewhere and also by the language of the play. Like the *Hippolytus* with Aphrodite and the *Bacchae* with Dionysus, the *Heracles* does two things with Hera: it first dramatizes the legend which contains her action as incredible in a goddess,<sup>5</sup> and then, having shown *and* asserted its incredibility, it converts her into a hovering symbol of all the unknown and unknowable forces which compel Heracles and men to suffer tragically and without cause or sense. As Dionysus is a complex symbol for the forces of life, amoral and necessitous, so Hera comprehends all the principles of peripety and change and random necessity. She is not Hera, but "Hera," a name given her for the want of a name, but loosely what the Greeks meant by *Tyche*, the lady of necessity and reversal. In asserting this "Hera" as the consequence of his own speech, Heracles annihilates the old Olympian Hera as a

5. Cf. ll. 1307-10 where Heracles asks: "Who could offer prayers to such a goddess? Jealous of Zeus for a mortal woman's sake, she had destroyed Hellas' greatest friend, though he was guiltless."

goddess, but also converts her into that demonic and terribly real power of his own necessity. The tragedy of Heracles is both true and real, but it is no longer the traditional story, nor is Heracles the same man, nor Hera the same goddess. And it is to confirm this conversion that Heracles a few lines later (l. 1357) concludes: "And now, I see, I must serve necessity (*tyche*)."<sup>6</sup> So too in his last reference to Hera he hints at the conversion by significantly juxtaposing both *tyche* and the name of Hera, claiming that "we all have been struck down by one *tyche* of Hera" (l. 1393).<sup>6</sup> And, if this were not enough, the play's overwhelming preoccupation with peripety as theme and as dislocation in structure would confirm the conversion. This, I think, is what we should expect, that the conversion of the old legend of Heracles and his old nobility into a new myth should be accompanied by the conversion of his necessity as well. To alter his old heroism without also altering the source of his suffering would be to cripple the conversion at the crucial point. It would obscure, that is, the fact that Heracles, though broken by necessity, still wins the moral victory over the power that ruins him, earning for himself and men in a different sense the victory claimed by Amphytrion over Zeus earlier:

And I, mere man, am nobler than you, a great god [l. 342].

He claims a courage more than equal to his condition and can therefore claim the dignity of his grief.

Heracles is no Aristotelian hero, nor is the play an Aristotelian tragedy; yet the *Heracles* is a great tragedy and Heracles himself a great tragic hero. The gulf between Euripides and Aristotle on the issues here is a great and permanent one that deserves to be stressed. For Aristotle a tragic fall is grounded in a consistent and harmonious sense of man's responsibility for his nature and his actions: when the hero falls, he falls for his own failure, and behind the rightness of his fall, working both pity and fear by the precise and relent-

6. Cf. ll. 1314, 1349, 1396, as well as the significant disjunction, "mastered by Hera or by necessity" in Amphytrion's speech at l. 20.



less nature of its operations, stands the order which society and a god-informed world impose upon the individual. What the law requires the gods require too, and so the Aristotelian play portrays, like an image of human life, the individual torn and suffering between his nature and an objective world-order. In Euripides it is otherwise; here the suffering of the individual under his necessity may have no such rightness, or even none at all, as in the *Heracles*. The world-order of the gods as reflected in "things as they are said to be" is either incredible or an indictment of that order, and if it imposes necessities unjustly upon a man, the very courage with which he endures makes him tragic and gives him the moral victory over his own fate. Similarly with society: for society may be no less corrupt than the "gods" and as unjust in the necessities it imposes. Euripides, that is, preserves the disorder of actual experience, measuring its horror against the unrequited illusion of order which sustains human beings. His image of tragic humanity is earned less in the conflict between the individual's nature and the necessities imposed by a higher order than in the conflict between the individual and his own internalized necessities. In the *Heracles*, at least, it is the very innocence of the hero which condemns the "gods" who make him mad; but because the gods are first rendered incredible and then transformed into a collective symbol for all the random, senseless operations of necessity in human life, the courage with which the hero meets his fate and asserts a moral order beyond his own experience is just as tragic and just as significant as that of Oedipus.

### *Date and Circumstances*

The *Heracles* is undated, and no attempt to date the play to any one year can be regarded as wholly successful. The most favored date is one close to 424-423. It has been held that the heavy emphasis throughout the play upon old age in connection with military service, particularly the bitter first strophe of the second *stasimon* (ll. 637 ff.), represents a direct

personal intrusion of the poet on having reached his sixtieth year (when he would have been exempt from further military service). On such a theory the date of the play would be 424-423. Similarly, the disproportionate debate on the bow (ll. 188 ff.) is interpreted as an overt reference to the Athenian success at Sphakteria in 425—a victory due largely to bowmen—or to the disastrous failure to employ archers in the hoplite defeat at Delium in 424. The reference to Delian maidens (ll. 687 ff.) is taken as a remembrance of the establishment of the quinquennial *Deliaes* in Athens in 425.

But no one of these suggestions, nor even their ensemble, can be regarded as decisive. The strongest argument for a later date is one given by stylistic and metrical tests, generally rather accurate for Euripides. These tend to place the play in the group of dramas which directly follow the Archidamian War, or about 418-416.

It is my opinion that the metrical tests are supported in their results by the general political tone of the play, with its sharp emphasis upon factional strife and its concern with the badge of true nobility. Further, the reconciliation between Sparta and Athens which is suggested in Theseus' domiciling of Heracles in Athens would seem to suggest (though it need not) a period in which reconciliation between Athens and Sparta was possible. Such reconciliation was a possibility only, I believe, in the period between the close of the Archidamian War in 421 and the aggressive anti-Spartan policy of Alcibiades which culminated in the Athenian-Argive defeat at Mantinea in 418. It is only against such a background as this, when all major parties in the Peloponnesian War were attempting abortive realignments, when peace must have appeared to be at least a remote possibility to contemporaries, that the lines of Megara (ll. 474-79) can be made to yield good sense. If so, the death of the children who embody the peaceful hopes of a united Hellas (ll. 135-37) must mean the renewal of conflict. A renewal of conflict must have seemed the certain consequence of Alcibiades' policies in 418, whereas in the years just previous an alliance between Athens and Sparta must have excited real hopes of an enduring peace.

## Text

The basis of this translation is the Oxford text of Gilbert Murray, though it has often been supplemented by others,<sup>1</sup> chiefly the brilliant edition of Leon Parmentier in the Budé series.<sup>2</sup> Upon a few occasions I have also adopted the emendations proposed by Wilamowitz. The notes on the translation are not designed to indicate all departures from the Murray text (nor even to mark the numerous occasions on which I preferred the reading of the manuscripts over modern emendations),<sup>3</sup> but to amplify variations or emendations whose use

1. L. 496: cf. D. S. Robertson, "Euripides, *H.F.* 497 ff.," C.R. LII (1938), 50-51.

2. L. 1241: "Then where it touches heaven, I shall strike." I adopt here the emendation of Parmentier and read *kai thenein* for *katthanein*. Since Theseus at l. 1246 asks Heracles what he will do and where his passion sweeps him, and Heracles replies in the following line that he will die, it seems plausible that *katthanein* here is a simple copyist's mistake for the less familiar *kai thenein*. And, as Parmentier remarks, the line as emended pivots on a play with the word *haptēi* in the preceding line (l. 1240). It is also more likely that Theseus in l. 1242 would take *thenein* as a threat against the gods than he would the precise self-directed *katthanein*. See L. Parmentier, *Revue de philologie*, XLIV (1920), 161.

3. L. 1351: *Enkarterēsō thanaton* ("I shall prevail against death"). *Thanaton* is here the reading of the manuscripts and, to some degree, it is supported by the identical phrase at *Andromache* l. 262 (though in each case the contextual meaning is different). Murray, following Wecklein and Wilamowitz, however, has altered *thanaton* to *bionton* (life).

So far as the quality of affirmation is concerned here, however, there is little difference between *thanaton* and *bionton*. Both imply the affirmative decision to bear necessity by living; clarity is unaffected by either reading. Though to prevail against life (in the sense of "persevering") may be more forceful than to prevail against death (in the sense of resisting the temptation to die), it seems to me that the imagery of the play is decisive for *thanaton*. In Heracles' words here, that is, we have the metaphorical (but also realistic) equivalent of the mythical descent to Hades and the conquest of death it signifies. Heracles has in his sufferings been to Hades and at death's door; he now wrestles with his death as myth once imagined him as wrestling for Cerberus. And just as the chorus once (ll. 655 ff.) hoped that

## HERACLES

appeared to me to bear upon the interpretation of the whole play. Lines which are bracketed indicate probable interpolations.

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the noble man might receive a double life as a reward of *aretē*, in this line we see the vindication of *aretē* in the internalized *eugeneia* which conquers death.

CHARACTERS

*Amphitryon, father of Heracles*

*Megara, wife of Heracles*

*Chorus of old men of Thebes*

*Lycus, usurper of the throne of Thebes*

*Heracles*

*Iris, messenger of the gods*

*Madness*

*Messenger*

*Theseus, king of Athens*

For Robert and Renée Preyer

*zeugos ge philion*

## HERACLES

*HYPOTHESIS: Heracles after his marriage with Megara, daughter of Creon, had children by her. . . . Leaving his sons in Thebes, he himself went to Argos to accomplish his labors for Eurystheus. After he had prevailed in all of them, he descended to Hades and passed a long time there and then returned, to the surprise of the living, who had thought him dead. While the Thebans were embroiled in civil strife against Creon the king, a usurper from Euboea by the name of Lycus. . . .*

*SCENE: Before the palace of Heracles at Thebes. In the foreground is the altar of Zeus. On its steps, in the posture of suppliants, sit the aged Amphytrion, Megara, and her three small sons. Amphytrion rises and speaks the prologue.*

### *Amphytrion*

What mortal lives who has not heard this name—  
Amphytrion of Argos, who shared his wife  
with Zeus? I am he: son of Alcaeus  
Perseus' son, but father of Heracles.  
Here I settled, in this Thebes, where once the earth  
was sown with dragonteeth and sprouted men;  
and Ares saved a few that they might people  
Cadmus' city with their children's children.  
From these sown men Creon was descended,  
son of Menoecus and our late king.  
This lady is Megara, Creon's daughter,

for whose wedding once all Thebes shrilled 10  
to flutes and songs as she was led, a bride,  
home to his father's halls by Heracles.  
Then my son left home, left Megara and kin,  
hoping to recover the plain of Argos  
and those gigantic walls from which I fled 15  
to Thebes, because I killed Electryon.  
He hoped to win me back my native land  
and so alleviate my grief. And therefore,  
mastered by Hera or by necessity,  
he promised to Eurystheus a vast price  
for our return: to civilize the world. 20  
When all his other labors had been done,  
he undertook the last: descended down  
to Hades through the jaws of Taenarus  
to hale back up to the light of day  
the triple-bodied dog.

He has not come back. 25

Here in Thebes the legend goes that once  
a certain Lycus married Dirce, our queen,  
and ruled this city with its seven gates  
before the twins of Zeus, those "white colts,"  
Amphion and Zethus, ruled the land. 30  
This Lycus' namesake and descendant,  
no native Theban but Euboean-born,  
attacked our city, sick with civil war,  
murdered Creon and usurped his throne.  
And now our marriage-bond with Creon's house 35  
has proved in fact to be our greatest ill.  
For since my son is gone beneath the earth,  
this upstart tyrant, Lycus, plans to kill  
the wife and sons of Heracles—and me,  
so old and useless, that I scarcely count— 40  
blotting murder with more, lest these boys  
grown to men, someday revenge their mother's house.

My son, when he descended to the darkness  
underground, left me here, appointing me  
both nurse and guardian of his little sons. 45

## HERACLES

Now, to keep these heirs of Heracles from death,  
 their mother and I in supplication  
 kneeled to Zeus the Savior at this altar,  
 established by the prowess of my son,  
 the trophy of his conquering spear  
 and monument of Minyan victory. 50  
 Here we sit, in utter destitution,  
 lacking food, water, and clothing; having no beds  
 but the bare earth beneath our bodies;  
 barred from our house, empty of hope.  
 And of our friends, some prove no friends at all, 55  
 while those still true are powerless to help.  
 This is what misfortune means among mankind;  
 upon no man who wished me well at all,  
 could I wish this acid test of friends might fall.

### *Megara*

Old man, marshal of our famous Theban arms, 60  
 who once destroyed the city of the Taphians,  
 how dark are all the ways of god to man!  
 Prosperity was my inheritance:  
 I had a father who could boast of wealth,  
 who had such power as makes the long spears 65  
 leap with greed against its proud possessor—  
 a father, blessed with children, who gave me  
 in glorious marriage to your Heracles.  
 But now his glory is gone down in death,  
 and you and I, old man, shall soon be dead, 70  
 and with us, these small sons of Heracles  
 whom I ward and nestle underwing.  
 First one, then another, bursts in tears,  
 and asks: "Mother, where has Father gone?  
 What is he doing? When will he come back?"  
 Then, too small to understand, they ask again 75  
 for "Father." I put them off with stories;  
 but when the hinges creak, they all leap up  
 to run and throw themselves at their father's feet.  
 Is there any hope? What chance of rescue



do we have, old man? We look to you. 80  
 The border is impassable by stealth;  
 sentries have been set on every road;  
 all hope that friends might rescue us is gone.  
 So tell me now if you have any plan, 85  
 or if you have resigned yourself to death.

*Amphitryon*

My child, I find it hard in such a case  
 to give advice offhand without hard thought.  
 We are weak, and weakness can only wait.

*Megara*

Wait for worse? Do you love life so much? 90

*Amphitryon*

I love it even now. I love its hopes.

*Megara*

And I. But hope is of things possible.

*Amphitryon*

A cure may come in wearing out the time.

*Megara*

It is the time between that tortures me.

*Amphitryon*

Even now, out of our very evils, 95  
 for you and me a better wind may blow.  
 My son, your husband, still may come. Be calm;  
 dry the living springs of tears that fill  
 your children's eyes. Console them with stories,  
 those sweet thieves of wretched make-believe. 100  
 Human misery must somewhere have a stop:  
 there is no wind that always blows a storm;  
 great good fortune comes to failure in the end.

# HERACLES

All is change; all yields its place and goes;  
to persevere, trusting in what hopes he has, 105  
is courage in a man. The coward despairs.

*(Enter the Chorus of old men of Thebes. They  
walk painfully, leaning upon their staffs.)*

## Chorus

### STROPHE

Leaning on our staffs we come  
to the vaulted halls and the old man's bed,  
our song the dirge of the dying swan, 110  
ourselves mere words, ghosts that walk  
in the visions of night,  
trembling with age,  
trembling to help.  
O children, fatherless sons,  
old man and wretched wife 115  
who mourn your lord in Hades!

### ANTISTROPHE

Do not falter. Drag your weary feet  
onward like the colt that, yoked and slow, 120  
tugs uphill, on rock, the heavy wain.  
If any man should fall,  
support him with your hands,  
age hold up his years 125  
as once when he was young  
he supported his peers  
in the toils of war  
and was no blot on his country's fame.

### EPODE

Look how the children's eyes 130  
flash forth like their father's!  
Misfortune has not left them,  
nor has loveliness.  
O Hellas, Hellas,

losing these boys, 135  
 what allies you lose!  
 No more. Look: I see my country's tyrant,  
 Lycus, approaching the palace.

*(Enter Lycus with attendants.)*

*Lycus*

You there,  
 father of Heracles, and you, his wife: 140  
 allow me one question. And you must allow it:  
 I am the power here; I ask what I wish.  
 How long will you seek to prolong your lives?  
 What hope have you? What could prevent your death?  
 Or do you think the father of these boys 145  
 who lies dead with Hades will still come back?  
 How shabbily you suffer when you both must die—  
 you who filled all Hellas with your hollow boasts  
 that Zeus was partner in your son's conception;  
 and you, that you were wife of the noblest man! 150  
 What was so prodigious in your husband's deeds?  
 Because he killed a hydra in a marsh?  
 Or the Nemean lion? They were trapped in nets,  
 not strangled, as he claims, with his bare hands.  
 Are these your arguments? Because of this, 155  
 you say, the sons of Heracles should live—  
 a man who, coward in everything else,  
 made his reputation fighting beasts,  
 who never buckled shield upon his arm,  
 never came near a spear, but held a bow, 160  
 the coward's weapon, handy to run away?  
 The bow is no proof of manly courage;  
 no, your real man stands firm in the ranks  
 and dares to face the gash the spear may make.  
 My policy, old man, is not mere cruelty; 165  
 call it caution. I am well aware  
 that I killed Creon and usurped his throne.  
 It does not suit my wishes that these boys  
 go free to take their grown revenge on me.

# HERACLES

## *Amphitryon*

Let Zeus act to guard his interest in his son.	170
For my part, Heracles, I have but words	
to prove this man's gross ignorance of you.	
I cannot bear that you should be abused.	
First for his slander, for such I call it	
when you are called a coward, Heracles.	175
I call upon the gods to bear me witness:	
that thunder of Zeus, his chariot	
in which you rode, stabbing with winged shafts	
the breasts of the giant spawn of earth,	
and raised the victory-cry with the gods!	180
Go to Pholoë and see the centaurs,	
go ask them, those four-legged monsters,	
what man they judge to be the bravest,	
if not my son, whose courage you call sham.	
Go ask Abantian Dirphys which bore you:	185
it will not praise you. You have never done	
one brave deed your fatherland could cite.	
You sneer at that wise invention, the bow.	
Listen to me and learn what wisdom is.	
Your spearsman is the slave of his weapons;	190
unless his comrades in the ranks fight well,	
then he dies, killed by their cowardice;	
and once his spear, his sole defense, is smashed,	
he has no means of warding death away.	
But the man whose hands know how to aim the bow,	195
holds the one best weapon: a thousand arrows shot,	
he still has more to guard himself from death.	
He stands far off, shooting at foes who see	
only the wound the unseen arrow plows,	
while he himself, his body unexposed,	200
lies screened and safe. This is best in war:	
to preserve yourself and to hurt your foe	
unless he stands secure, beyond your range.	
Such are my arguments, squarely opposed	
to yours on every point at issue here.	
What will you achieve by killing these boys?	205

How have they hurt you? Yet I grant you wise  
 in one respect: being base yourself,  
 you fear the children of a noble man.  
 Still, this goes hard with us, that we must die  
 to prove your cowardice, a fate which you 210  
 might better suffer at our better hands,  
 if the mind of Zeus intended justice here.  
 But if the sceptre is what you desire,  
 then let us go as exiles from the land.  
 But beware of force, lest you suffer it, 215  
 when god swings round again with veering wind.

O country of Cadmus, on you too  
 my reproaches fall! Is this your vigil  
 for the sons of Heracles? For Heracles,  
 who single-handed fought your Minyan foe 220  
 and made Thebes see once more with free men's eyes?  
 No more can I praise Hellas, nor be still,  
 finding her so craven toward my son:  
 with sword, spear, and fire she should have come  
 to help these boys in gratitude to him, 225  
 for all his labors clearing land and sea.  
 Poor children, both Thebes and Hellas fail you.  
 And so you turn to me, a weak old man,  
 nothing more now than a jawing of words,  
 forsaken by that strength I used to have, 230  
 left only with this trembling husk of age.  
 But if my youth and strength could come again,  
 I'd take my spear and bloody your brown hair  
 until you ran beyond the bounds of Atlas,  
 trying, coward, to outrun my spear! 235

### *Chorus*

There is a source of speech in all brave men  
 which does not fail, although the tongue be slow.

### *Lycus*

Go on, rant, pile up your tower of words!  
 My actions, not my words, shall answer your abuse.

# HERACLES

(*Turning to his attendants.*)

Go, men, to Helicon and Parnassus: 240  
 tell the woodsmen there to chop up oaken logs  
 and haul them to the city. Then pile your wood  
 around the altar here on every side,  
 and let it blaze. Burn them all alive  
 until they learn the dead man rules no more; 245  
 that I, and I alone, am the power here.  
 But you old men, for this defiance,  
 you shall mourn the sons of Heracles  
 and each disaster that devours this house, 250  
 each separate grief, until you learn  
 you are only slaves; I am the master.

## Chorus

O sons of earth, men whom Ares sowed,  
 teeth he tore from the dragon's foaming jaw,  
 up, up with these staffs that prop our arms  
 and batter the skull of this godless man, 255  
 no Theban, but an alien lording it  
 over the younger men, to our great shame!

(*To Lycus.*)

Never shall you boast that I am your slave,  
 never will you reap the harvest of my work,  
 all I labored for. Go back whence you came; 260  
 rage there. So long as there is life in me,  
 you shall not kill the sons of Heracles.  
 He has not gone so deep beneath the earth.  
 Because you ruined, then usurped, this land,  
 he who gave it help must go without his due. 265  
 Am I a meddler, then, because I help  
 the friend who, being dead, needs help the most?  
 O right hand, how you ache to hold a spear,  
 but cannot, want foundering on weakness.  
 Else, I should have stopped your mouth that calls me  
 slave, 270  
 and ruled this Thebes, in which you now exult,

with credit. But corrupt with evil schemes  
and civil strife, this city lost its mind;  
for were it sane, it would not live your slave.

*Megara*

Old sirs, I thank you. Friends rightly show just indignation on their friends' behalf.	275
But do not let your rage on our account involve your ruin too. Amphitryon, hear what I think for what it may be worth.	
I love my children. How not love these boys born of my labors? I am in terror of their death. And yet how base a thing it is when a man will struggle with necessity!	280
We have to die. Then do we have to die consumed alive, mocked by those we hate?— for me a worse disaster than to die.	285
Our house and birth demand a better death. Upon your helm the victor's glory sits, forbidding that you die a coward's death;	
while my husband needs no witnesses to swear he would not want these sons of his to live by living cowards. Because it hurts his sons, disgraces break a man of noble birth;	290
and I must imitate my husband here. Consider of what stuff your hopes are made;	295
you think your son will come from underground. Who of all the dead comes home from Hades? Or do you think you'll mellow <i>him</i> with prayers?	
No, you must shun a brutal enemy; yield to noble, understanding men	300
who, met halfway as friends, give mercy freely. The thought had come to me that prayers might win the children's banishment; but this is worse, to preserve them for a life of beggary.	
How does the saying go? Hardly one day do men look kindly on their banished friend.	305
Dare death with us, which awaits you anyway.	

## HERACLES

By your great soul, I challenge you, old friend.  
The man who sticks it out against his fate  
shows spirit, but the spirit of a fool. 310  
No man alive can budge necessity.

### *Chorus*

I could have stopped the mouth of any man  
who threatened you, had I my old strength back.  
But now I am nothing. With you it rests,  
Amphitryon, to avert disaster now. 315

### *Amphitryon*

Not cowardice, not love of life, keep me  
from death, but my hope to save these children.  
I am in love, it seems, with what cannot be.

*(Turning to Lycus.)*

Here, king, here is my throat, ready for your sword;  
murder me, stab me through, hurl me from a cliff, 320  
but, I beg you, grant us both this one boon.  
Murder us before you kill these children;  
spare us from seeing that ghastly sight,  
these boys gasping out their lives, crying  
"Mother!" and "Grandfather!" For the rest, 325  
do your worst. Our hope is gone; we have to die.

### *Megara*

I beg you, grant me this one last request,  
and so by one act you shall oblige us both.  
Let me adorn my children for their death;  
open those doors which are locked to us 330  
and give them that much share of their father's house.

### *Lycus*

I grant it. Attendants, undo the bolts!

*(Attendants slide open the center doors of the palace.)*

Go in and dress. I do not begrudge you clothes.  
But when your dressing for your death is done,



then I shall give you to the world below. 335  
 (Exit Lycus.)

*Megara*

Come, my sons, follow your poor mother's steps  
 into your father's halls. Other men  
 possess his wealth; we still possess his name.

(Exit Megara with children.)

*Amphitryon*

For nothing, then, O Zeus, you shared my wife!  
 In vain we called you partner in my son! 340  
 Your love is even less than you pretended;  
 and I, mere man, am nobler than you, great god.  
 I did not betray the sons of Heracles.  
 You knew well enough to creep into my bed  
 and take what was not yours, what no man gave: 345  
 what do you know of saving those you love?  
 You are a callous god or were born unjust!

(Exit Amphitryon to palace.)

*Chorus*

STROPHE 1

First for joy, the victor's song;  
 then the dirge; sing *ailinos* for Linos!  
 So Apollo sings, sweeping with golden pick 350  
 his lyre of lovely voice.  
 And so I sing of him  
 who went in darkness underground—  
   let him be the son of Zeus,  
   let him be Amphitryon's—  
 of him I sing, a dirge of praise, 355  
 a crown of song upon his labors.  
 For of noble deeds the praises are  
   the glory of the dead.  
 First he cleared the grove of Zeus,  
 and slew the lion in its lair; 360  
 the tawny hide concealed his back,

oval of those awful jaws  
 cowed his golden hair.

## ANTISTROPHE 1

Next the centaurs: slaughtered them,  
 that mountain-ranging savage race, 365  
 laid them low with poisoned shafts,  
 with winged arrows slew them all.  
 Too well the land had known them:  
 Peneios' lovely rapids,  
 vast plains, unharvested,  
 homesteads under Pelion, 370  
 and the places near Homole,  
 whence their cavalry rode forth  
 with weapons carved of pine,  
 and tamed all Thessaly.  
 And next he slew the spotted hind 375  
 whose antlers grew of golden horn,  
 that robber-hind, that ravager,  
 whose horns now gild Oenoë's shrine,  
 for Artemis the huntress.

## STROPHE 2

Then mounted to his car 380  
 and mastered with the bit  
 Diomedes' mares, that knew  
 no bridle, stabled in blood,  
 greedy jaws champing flesh,  
 foul mares that fed on men! 385  
 And thence crossed over  
 swirling silver, Hebros' waters,  
 on and on, performing labors  
 for Mycenae's king.  
 And there by Pelion's headland,  
 near the waters of Anauros, 390  
 his shafts brought Cycnus down,  
 that stranger-slaying monster,  
 host of Amphanaia.

# EURIPIDES

## ANTISTROPHE 2

Thence among the singing maidens, western halls' Hesperides.	395
Plucked among the metal leaves the golden fruit, and slew the orchard's dragon-guard whose tail of amber coiled the trunk untouchably. He passed below the sea and set a calmness in the lives of men whose living is the oar.	400
Under bellied heaven next, he put his hand as prop: there in the halls of Atlas, his manliness held up heaven's starry halls.	405

## STROPHE 3

He passed the swelling sea of black, and fought the Amazonian force foregathered at Maeotis where the many rivers meet. What town of Hellas missed him as he mustered friends to fight, to win the warrior women's gold-encrusted robes, in quest for a girdle's deadly quarry?	410
And Hellas won the prize, spoils of a famous foreign queen, which now Mycenae keeps.	415
He seared each deadly hydra-head of Lerna's thousand-headed hound; in her venom dipped the shaft that brought three-bodied Geryon down, herdsman of Erytheia.	420

## ANTISTROPHE 3

And many races more he ran, and won in all the victor's crown,	425
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## HERACLES

whose harbor now is Hades' tears,  
 the final labor of them all;  
 there his life is disembarked  
 in grief. He comes no more.  
 His friends have left his house, 430  
 and Charon's ferry waits  
 to take his children's lives  
 the godless, lawless trip of no return.  
 To your hands your house still turns,  
 and you are gone! 435  
 Could I have my youth once more,  
 could I shake my spear once more  
 beside the comrades of my youth,  
 my courage now would champion  
 yours sons. But youth comes back no more 440  
 that blessed me once.

### EPODE

Look: I see the children coming now,  
 wearing the garments of the grave,  
 sons of Heracles who once was great;  
 and there, his wife, drawing her sons 445  
 behind her as she comes; and the old man,  
 father of Heracles. O pitiful sight!  
 I cannot hold the tears that break  
 from these old eyes. 450

*(Enter Megara from the palace. She is followed  
 by the children, dressed in the garments of  
 the dead. Last comes AmphiTryon.)*

### *Megara*

Where is the priest with sacrificial knife?  
 Where is the killer of our wretched lives?  
 Here the victims stand, ready for Hades.  
 O my boys, this incongruity of death:  
 beneath one yoke, old man, children and mother. 455  
 How miserably we die, these children and I!

Upon these faces now I look my last.  
 I gave you birth and brought you up to be  
 but mocked and murdered by our enemies.

How bitterly my hopes for you have failed, 460  
 those hopes I founded on your father's words.

*(She turns to each child in turn.)*

To you your father would have left all Argos:  
 in Eurystheus' halls you would have ruled  
 and held the sway over rich Pelasgia.

It was upon your head he sometimes threw 465  
 the skin of tawny lion that he wore.

You, made king of chariot-loving Thebes,  
 would have inherited your mother's lands,  
 because you teased them from your father once.

Sometimes in play, he put in your right hand 470  
 that carven club he kept for self-defense.

To you, he would have left Oechalia,  
 ravaged once by his far-shooting shafts.

There are three of you, and with three kingdoms  
 your heroic father would have raised you up. 475

And I had chosen each of you a bride,  
 from Athens, Thebes, and Sparta, binding our house  
 by marriage, that having such strong anchors down,  
 you might in happiness ride out your lives.

Now all is gone, and fortune, veering round, 480  
 gives each of you your death as though a bride,

and in my tears your bridal shower is,  
 while your father's father mourns the feast  
 that makes you all the sons-in-law of death.

Which shall I take first, which of you the last, 485  
 to lift you up, take in my arms and kiss?

If only I could gather up my tears,  
 and like the tawny bee from every flower,  
 distil to one small nectar all my grief!

O dearest Heracles, if any voice 490  
 from here reaches to Hades, hear me now!

Your sons, your father, are dying . . . and I,

## H E R A C L E S

who was once called blessed because of you.  
 Help us, come! Come, even as a ghost;  
 even as a dream, your coming would suffice.  
 For these are cowards who destroy your sons. 495

### *Amphitryon*

Send your prayers, my child, to the world below,  
 while I hold out my hands to heaven.  
 We implore you, Zeus, if still you mean to help,  
 help us now before it is too late. 500  
 How often have I called! In vain, my labors.  
 For death is on us like necessity.

Our lives, old friends, are but a little while,  
 so let them run as sweetly as you can,  
 and give no thought to grief from day to day.  
 For time is not concerned to keep our hopes, 505  
 but hurries on its business, and is gone.  
 You see in me a man who once had fame,  
 who did great deeds; but fortune in one day  
 has snatched it from me as though a feather. 510  
 Great wealth, great reputation! I know no man  
 with whom they stay. Friends of my youth, farewell.  
 You look your last on him who loved you well.

*(Megara suddenly catches sight of Heracles  
 approaching from a distance.)*

### *Megara*

Look, Father! My dearest! Can it be?

### *Amphitryon*

I cannot say. I dare not say, my child. 515

### *Megara*

It is he, whom we heard was under earth,  
 unless some dream comes walking in the light.  
 A dream? This is no dream my longing makes!  
 It is *he*, Father, your son, no other!  
 Run, children, fasten to your father's robes 520

E U R I P I D E S

and never let him go! Quick, run! He comes  
to rescue us and Zeus comes with him.

*(Enter Heracles, armed with bow and arrows, his club  
in his hand. He does not see his family at  
first, but salutes his halls.)*

*Heracles*

I greet my hearth! I hail my house and halls!  
How gladly I behold the light once more  
and look on you!

*(He sees his family.)* 525

What is this I see?  
my children before the house? with garlands  
on their heads? and my wife surrounded  
by a crowd of men? my father in tears?  
What misfortune makes him cry? I'll go and ask  
what disaster now has come upon my house.

530

*Megara*

O my dearest. . . .

*Amphitryon*

O daylight returning!

*Megara*

You come, alive, in time to rescue us!

*Heracles*

Father, what has happened? What does this mean?

*Megara*

Murder. Forgive me, Father, if I snatch  
and speak the words that you should rightly say.  
I am a woman: anguish hurts me more,  
and my children were being put to death. . . .

535

*Heracles*

Apollo! what a prelude to your tale!

HERACLES

*Megara*

My father is dead. My brothers are dead.

*Heracles*

What! How did they die? Who killed them?

540

*Megara*

Murdered by Lycus, the upstart tyrant.

*Heracles*

In revolution? Or civil war?

*Megara*

Civil war. Now he rules our seven gates.

*Heracles*

But why should you and my father be afraid?

*Megara*

He planned to kill us: your sons, father, and me.

545

*Heracles*

What had he to fear from my orphaned sons?

*Megara*

Lest they take revenge some day for Creon's death.

*Heracles*

But why these garments? Why are they dressed for death?

*Megara*

It was for our own deaths we put them on.

*Heracles*

You would have died by violence? O gods!

550

*Megara*

We had no friends. We heard that you were dead.



*Heracles*

How did you come to give up hope for me?

*Megara*

The heralds of Eurystheus proclaimed you dead.

*Heracles*

Why did you abandon my house and hearth?

*Megara*

By force. He dragged your father from his bed.

555

*Heracles*

He had no shame, but so dishonored age?

*Megara*

Lycus have shame? He knows no such goddess.

*Heracles*

And were my friends so scarce when I was gone?

*Megara*

In misfortune, what friend remains a friend?

*Heracles*

They thought so little of my Minyan wars?

560

*Megara*

Again I say, misfortune has no friends.

*Heracles*

Rip from your heads those wreaths of Hades!  
Lift your faces to the light; with seeing eyes,  
take your sweet reprieve from death and darkness.  
And I—a task for my one hand alone—  
shall go and raze this upstart tyrant's house,  
cut off that blaspheming head and give it  
to the dogs to paw. All those men of Thebes

565

## H E R A C L E S

who took my goodness and returned me ill—  
 this bow with which I won the victor's crown 570  
 shall slaughter them with rain of winged shafts.  
 till all Ismenus chokes upon the corpses  
 and Dirce's silver waters run with blood.  
 What should I defend if not my wife and sons  
 and my old father? Farewell, my labors! 575  
 for wrongly I preferred you more than these.  
 They would have died for me, and I should die  
 in their defense. Or is this bravery,  
 to do Eurystheus' orders and contend  
 with lions and hydras, and not to struggle 580  
 for my children's lives? From this time forth,  
 call me no more "Heracles the victor."

### *Chorus*

This is right, that a man defend his sons,  
 his aged father, and his wedded wife.

### *Amphitryon*

My son, it is like you to love your friends 585  
 and hate your foe. But do not act too fast.

### *Heracles*

How do I act faster than I should?

### *Amphitryon*

The king has henchmen, a mob of needy men  
 who pass themselves off for men of wealth.  
 These men, their substance drained away by sloth 590  
 and spending, have promoted civil strife  
 and wrecked the state to mulct their neighbors.  
 You were seen coming here. Beware therefore  
 lest your enemy be stronger than you guess.

### *Heracles*

I do not care if all the city saw me! 595  
 But seeing a bird in some foreboding place,

I guessed some trouble had fallen on my house,  
and thus forewarned, I entered secretly.

*Amphitryon*

Good. Go now, enter your house and greet your hearth.  
Look on your father's house; let it behold you. 600  
Shortly the king will come to hale us off  
and slaughter us: your wife, your sons, and me.  
Wait here, and everything shall come to hand;  
with safety too. But let the city go,  
my son, until we finish matters here. 605

*Heracles*

You advise me well. I will go within.  
I owe first greetings to my household gods  
because they brought me home from sunless caves  
of Kore and Hades. I shall not slight them.

*Amphitryon*

Did you really descend to Hades, son? 610

*Heracles*

Yes; I brought back the triple-headed dog.

*Amphitryon*

You subdued him? or was he the goddess' gift?

*Heracles*

Subdued him. Luck was mine: I saw the mysteries.

*Amphitryon*

And is the monster at Eurystheus' house?

*Heracles*

No, at Hermione, in Demeter's grove. 615

*Amphitryon*

Does Eurystheus know of your return above?

## HERACLES

*Heracles*

No, I came here first to learn of you.

*Amphitryon*

Why did you delay so long underground?

*Heracles*

To save Theseus from Hades, Father.

*Amphitryon*

Where is he now? Gone to his native land?

620

*Heracles*

He went to Athens, rejoicing to be free.

*(He turns and addresses his children.)*

Follow your father to the house, my sons,  
for this, your going in, shall be more fair  
than your coming out. Put your fears away,  
and stop those tears that well up in your eyes.  
And you, dear wife, gather your courage up,  
tremble no more, and let my garments go.  
I have no wings to fly from those I love.

625

Look:

They will not let me go, but clutch my clothes  
more tightly. How close you came to death!

630

*(He sets down his bow and club and takes  
his children by the hands.)*

Here, I'll take your hands and lead you in my wake,  
like a ship that tows its little boats behind,  
for I accept this care and service  
of my sons. Here all mankind is equal:  
rich and poor alike, they love their children.  
With wealth distinctions come: some possess it,  
some do not. All mankind loves its children.

635

*(Exit Heracles with the children, followed  
by Megara and Amphitryon.)*

*Chorus*

## STROPHE 1

Youth I long for always.  
 But old age lies on my head,  
 a weight more heavy than Aetna's rocks;  
 darkness hides 640  
 the light of my eyes.  
 Had I the wealth of an Asian king,  
 or a palace crammed with gold, 645  
 both would I give for youth,  
 loveliest in wealth,  
 in poverty, loveliest.  
 But old age I loathe: ugly,  
 murderous. Let the waves take it 650  
 so it comes no more to the homes  
 and cities of men! Let the wind  
 whirl it away forever!

## ANTISTROPHE 1

If the gods were wise and understood 655  
 what human wisdom understands,  
 second youth would be their gift,  
 to seal the goodness of a man.  
 And so, conspicuous of life,  
 the good would run their race to death 660  
 and double back to light again.  
 But evil men should live their lap,  
 one single life, and run no more.  
 By such a sign all men would know  
 the wicked from the good, 665  
 as when the clouds are broken  
 and the sailor sees the stars.  
 But now the gods have put  
 between the noble and the base  
 no clear distinction down. 670  
 And time and age go wheeling on,  
 exalting only wealth.

# HERACLES

## STROPHE 2

Never shall I cease from this,  
 Muses with the Graces joining,  
 loveliness in yoke together. 675  
 I may not live without the Muses.  
 Let my head be always crowned!  
 May my old age always sing  
 of Memory, the Muses' mother,  
 always shall I sing the crown 680  
 of Heracles the victor!  
 So long as these remain—  
     Dionysus' gift of wine,  
     the lyre of seven strings  
     the shrilling of the flute—  
 never shall I cease to sing, 685  
     Muses who made me dance!

## ANTISTROPHE 2

Paeans sing the Delian maidens,  
 a song for Leto's lovely son,  
 wheeling at the temple gates  
 the lovely mazes of the dance. 690  
 So paeans at your gate I raise,  
 pouring like the dying swan,  
 from hoary throat a song of praise.  
 I have a noble theme of song: 695  
     He is the son of Zeus!  
     But far beyond his birth,  
     his courage lifts him up,  
 whose labors gave this mortal calm,  
     who cleared away the beasts. 700

*(Enter Lycus, with attendants. Amphitryon  
 emerges from the palace.)*

*Lycus*

None too soon, Amphitryon, have you appeared.  
 A long time now you've spent in dallying  
 with your robes and ornaments of death.

Go, call the wife and sons of Heracles  
and bid them show themselves before the house. 705  
On those terms, I let you clothe yourselves for death.

*Amphitryon*

King, you persecute in me a wretched man,  
and by abusing us, you wrong the dead.  
King you may be, but tread more gently here.  
Death is your decree, and we accept it 710  
as we must. As you decide, then so must we.

*Lycus*

Where is Megara? Where are the children?

*Amphitryon*

To chance a guess from here outside, I think . . .

*Lycus*

Well, what do you think? What makes you think so?

*Amphitryon*

. . . kneels at the hearth and makes her prayers . . . 715

*Lycus*

If she asks for life, her prayers are pointless.

*Amphitryon*

. . . and implores in vain her husband to come.

*Lycus*

He is not here to help. He will not come.

*Amphitryon*

Not unless some god restore him to us.

*Lycus*

Go inside and fetch her from the house. 720

# HERACLES

*Amphitryon*

Then I should be accomplice in her death.

*Lycus*

Very well then. Since your scruples forbid,  
I, who lack such petty fears, shall go and fetch  
the mother and her sons. Attend me, guards,  
and help me put good riddance to this chore.

725

*(Exit Lycus, attended by guards, into the palace.)*

*Amphitryon*

Go, march in to your fate. Someone, I think,  
will see you in. Expect for what you did  
evil in return. How justly, old friends,  
into that net whose meshes hide the sword,  
he goes, the man who would have slaughtered us,  
coward that he is! I'll go in and watch  
his body fall. This is sweet: to see your foe  
perish and pay to justice all he owes.

730

*(Exit Amphitryon into the palace.)*

## STROPHE 1

*Chorus*

Disaster is reversed!  
The tyrant's life turns back to Hades!  
Justice flows back! O fate of the gods,  
returning!

735

Your time has come. You go now where the price  
for outrage on your betters must be paid.

740

Joy once more! Overboard with grief!  
The king has come again!  
He has come, of whom I had no hope,  
my country's king, come back again!

745

Peer within the house, old friends. Let me see  
if what I hope to see is taking place.



*Lycus**(Within.)*

Help! Help!

*Chorus*

## ANTISTROPHE 1

From within the song begins 750  
 I long to hear. That cry  
 was prelude to his death:  
 the tyrant's death is near.

*Lycus*

O land of Cadmus! Treachery! I die!

*Chorus*

Die: you would have killed. Show your boldness now 755  
 as you repay to justice all you owe.

What lying mortal made that fable  
 that mindless tale  
 that slander on the blessed?  
 Who denied the gods are strong?

Old friends, the godless man is dead! 760  
 The house is silent. Turn to the dances!  
 Those I love now prosper as I hoped.

## STROPHE 2

Let dance and feasting now prevail  
 throughout this holy town of Thebes!  
 Joy and mourning change their places, 765  
 old disaster turns to dancing!  
 Change now rings my change of song!  
 The new king runs to death, the old king rules!  
 Our king runs home from Hades' harbor! 770  
 He comes again, he comes, my king and hope,  
 of whom my hope despaired.

# HERACLES

## ANTISTROPHE 2

The gods of heaven do prevail:  
 they raise the good and scourge the bad.  
 Excess of happiness—it drives  
 men's minds awry; in its train 775  
 comes on corrupted power.  
 No man foresees the final stretch of time.  
 Evil lures him, justice races by,  
 until he wrecks at last the somber car  
 that holds his happiness. 780

## STROPHE 3

O Ismenus, come with crowns!  
 Dance and sing: you gleaming streets  
 of seven-gated Thebes!  
 Come, O Dirce, lovely river,  
 leave your father's waters, bring  
 the nymphs, Asopus' daughters! 785  
 Come and sing the famous crown  
 of Heracles the victor!  
 O wooded crag of Delphi, 790  
 O Muses' homes on Helicon!  
 make my city's walls resound,  
 echo back the joy of Thebes,  
 city where the sown men rose  
 with shields of bronze, where still 795  
 their children's children dwell,  
 a blessed light to Thebes!

## ANTISTROPHE 3

O marriage-bed two bridegrooms shared!  
 One was man; the other, Zeus,  
 who entered in the bridal bed 800  
 and with Alcmene lay.  
 How true, O Zeus, that marriage  
 proves to be! Your part therein,  
 against all doubt, is proven true!  
 For time at last has clearly shown the strength 805

of Heracles the hero.

He made his way from Pluto's halls;

he left the dungeon underground.

He is to me a better king

than that ignoble lord:

810

comparison made plain

in the struggle of the sword,

if justice still finds favor

among the blessed gods.

*(A crash of thunder. The figure of Madness, gorgon-faced and holding a goad, appears in a black chariot on the roof of the palace. On the other side of the roof Iris is seen.)*

Ah! Ah!

815

Is the same terror on us all?

Look, old friends: what phantom hovers on the house?

Fly, fly!

Stir your heavy limbs! Back, away!

Lord Paian, help us! Avert disaster!

820

*Iris*

Courage, old men. You see there, Madness,

child of night, and me, servant of the gods,

Iris. We bring no harm upon your city.

Against one man alone our war is waged,

825

him whom men call Alcmene's son by Zeus.

Until his bitter labors had been done,

his fate preserved him; nor would father Zeus

let me or Hera do him any harm.

But now Eurystheus' orders have been done,

830

Hera plans, by making him destroy his sons,

to taint him with fresh murder; and I agree.

Up, then, unmarried child of blackest Night,

rouse up, harden that relentless heart,

send madness on this man, confound his mind

835

# HERACLES

and make him kill his sons. Madden his feet;  
drive him, goad him, shake out the sails of death  
and speed his passage over Acheron,  
where he must take his crown of lovely sons.  
Let him learn what Hera's anger is,  
and what is mine. For the gods are nothing,  
and men prevail, if this one man escape.

840

## *Madness*

I was born of noble birth: my mother  
is the Night, and my father, Uranus.  
My functions make me loathsome to the gods,  
nor do I gladly visit men I love.  
And I advise both you and Hera now,  
lest I see you stumble, to hear me out.  
This man against whose house you drive me on  
has won great fame on earth and with the gods.  
He reclaimed the pathless earth and raging sea,  
and he alone held up the honors of the gods  
when they wilted at the hands of evil men.  
I advise you: renounce these wicked plans.

845

850

## *Iris*

Hera's scheme and mine need no advice from you.

855

## *Madness*

I would place you on the better path: you choose the  
worse.

## *Iris*

Hera has not sent you down to show your sanity.

## *Madness*

O Sun, be my witness: I act against my will.  
But since I must perform the service you and Hera ask,  
in full cry, like the hound that bays the huntsman,  
go I will: to the heart of Heracles I run,  
more fast, more wild than ocean's groaning breakers go,

860

than earthquake, or the thunder's agonizing crack!  
 I shall batter through the roof and leap upon the house!  
 He shall kill his sons and, killing, shall not know 865  
 he kills what he begot, until my madness leave him.

Look: already, head writhing, he leaps the starting-post;  
 jumps and now stops; his eyeballs bulge, and pupils roll;  
 his breath comes heaving up, a bull about to charge!  
 And now he bellows up the horrid fates from hell; 870  
 he groans and shouts; he dances to the pipes of terror!  
 Soar to Olympus, Iris, on your honored way,  
 while I now sink, unseen, to the house of Heracles.

*(Iris and Madness disappear. As they go, a weird  
 piping of the flute begins, now soft, now  
 loud, broken in rhythm, pitched in-  
 sanely, and then suddenly still.)*

*Chorus*

O city, mourn! Your flower 875  
 is cut down, the son of Zeus.  
 O Hellas, mourn! You have lost  
 your savior! He dances now  
 to the fatal flutes of madness!

Madness has mounted her car; 880  
 she goads her team!  
 she drives for death!  
 O gorgon of Night, O hiss  
 of a hundred snakes! O Madness,  
 whose look makes stones of men!

Instantly, god's fortune is reversed! 885  
 Instantly, and father murders sons!

*Amphitryon*

O horror!

*(Within:)*

*Chorus*

O Zeus, your son has lost his sons!

Vengeance, mad, implacable, exacts  
the penalty! Disaster lays him low! 890

*Amphitryon*  
O my house!

*Chorus*  
Now the dance begins! Not here,  
the drums! no lovely thyrsos here!

*Amphitryon*  
O my home!

*Chorus*  
For blood, she drives, for blood!  
No wine of Dionysus here! 895

*Amphitryon*  
Fly, children, save yourselves!

*Chorus*  
Horrid,  
horrid piping of the flute!  
His sons, he hunts them down!  
Madness through the house,  
madness dancing death!

*Amphitryon*  
O grief! 900

*Chorus*  
I grieve for those two,  
for the old man, for the mother  
who bore, who nursed her sons in vain!

Look, look!  
Whirlwind shakes the house, the roof falls! 905

Ah! on the roof!  
O daughter of Zeus, what do you do?  
You have brought upon this house  
ruin that reaches to hell,  
as once you ruined Enceladus!

*(A messenger appears from the palace.)*

*Messenger*

O bodies blanched with age. . . . 910

*Chorus*

Why that cry?

*Messenger*

Horror in the house!

*Chorus*

O my prophetic fears!

*Messenger*

The children live no more.

*Chorus*

Ah. . . .

*Messenger*

Mourn them, grieve them.

*Chorus*

Cruel murder,

O cruel hands of a father! 915

*Messenger*

No words could tell what we have seen.

*Chorus*

How did it happen, how this madness,  
children killed by a father's hands?  
How did disaster strike, madness

hurled from heaven on this house? 920  
How did those pitiful children die?

*Messenger*

Offerings to Zeus were set before the hearth  
to purify the house, for Heracles  
had cast the body of the king outside.  
There the children stood, in lovely cluster, 925  
with Megara and the old man. In holy hush  
the basket made the circle of the hearth.  
And then, as Heracles reached out his hand  
to take the torch and dip it in the water,  
he stood stock-still. There he stood, not moving, 930  
while the children stared. Suddenly he changed:  
his eyes rolled and bulged from their sockets,  
and the veins stood out, gorged with blood, and froth  
began to trickle down his bearded chin.  
Then he spoke, laughing like a maniac: 935  
"Why hallow fire, Father, to cleanse the house  
before I kill Eurystheus? Why double work,  
when at one blow I might complete my task?  
I'll go and fetch Eurystheus' head, add it  
to that other corpse, then purify my hands. 940  
Empty your water out! Drop those baskets!  
Someone fetch my bow. Put weapons in my hands:  
I march against Mycenae! Let me have  
crowbars and picks: the Cyclopes built well,  
cramping stone on stone with plumb and mallet, 945  
but with my pick I'll rip them down again."  
Then he fancied that his chariot stood there;  
he made as though to leap its rails, and rode off,  
prodding with his hand as though it held a goad.  
Whether to laugh or shudder, we could not tell. 950  
We stared at one another. Then one man asked,  
"Is the master playing, or is he . . . mad?"  
Up and down, throughout the house, he drove,  
and riding through the great hall, claimed it was  
Nisus' city, though it was, in fact, his house. 955



He threw himself to the floor, and acted out  
 a feast. He tarried there a while, then said  
 he was approaching Isthmus' wooded valley.  
 He unstrapped his buckles and stripped himself bare,  
 and wrestled with no one; then called for silence 960  
 and crowned himself the victor of a match  
 that never was. Then raged against Eurystheus,  
 and said he'd come to Mycenae. His father  
 caught him by that muscled hand and said:  
 "What do you mean, my son? What is this journey 965  
 that you make? Or has the blood of those you've slain  
 made you mad?" He thought Eurystheus' father  
 had come, trembling, to supplicate his hand;  
 pushed him away, and set his bow and arrows  
 against his sons. He thought he was killing 970  
 Eurystheus' children. Trembling with terror,  
 they rushed here and there; one hid beneath  
 his mother's robes, one ran to the shadow  
 of a pillar, and the last crouched like a bird  
 below the altar. Their mother shrieked:  
 "You are their father! Will you kill your sons?" 975  
 And shouts broke from the old man and the slaves.  
 Around the pillar he pursued his son  
 in dreadful circles, then caught up with him  
 and pierced him to the heart. Backward he fell,  
 dying, and stained the flagstones with his blood. 980  
 His father shouted in triumph, exulting,  
 "Here is the first of Eurystheus' youngsters dead;  
 his death repays me for his father's hate."  
 He aimed his bow at the second, who crouched  
 below the altar's base, trying to hide. 985  
 The boy leaped first, fell at his father's knees  
 and held his hand up to his father's chin.  
 "Dearest Father," he cried, "do not murder me.  
 I am your own son, yours, not Eurystheus'!"  
 But he stared from stony gorgon eyes, 990  
 found his son too close to draw the bow,  
 and brought his club down on that golden head,

# HERACLES

and smashed the skull, as though a blacksmith  
 smiting steel. Now that his second son lay dead,  
 he rushed to kill the single victim left. 995  
 But before he drew the bow, the mother  
 seized her child, ran within and locked the doors.  
 And, as though these were the Cyclopean walls,  
 he pried the panels up, ripped out the jambs,  
 and with one arrow brought down son and wife. 1000  
 And then he rushed to kill his father too,  
 but look! a phantom came—or so it seemed to us—  
 Pallas, with plumed helm, brandishing a spear.  
 She hurled a rock; it struck him on the chest,  
 stopped short his murderous rage and knocked him 1005  
 into sleep. He slumped to the floor and hit  
 his back against a pillar which had fallen there,  
 snapped in two pieces when the roof collapsed.  
 Delivered from the fear that made us run, 1010  
 we helped the old man lash him down with ropes 1009  
 against the pillar, lest when he awakes  
 still greater grief be added to the rest.  
 He sleeps now, wretched man, no happy sleep,  
 killer of his wife and sons. I do not know  
 one man alive more miserable than this. 1015

*(Exit messenger.)*

## Chorus

The hill of Argos had a murder once  
 Danaus' daughters did, murder's byword,  
 unbelievable in Hellas!  
 But murder here has far outrun,  
 surpassed by far  
 that ancient crime. 1020

And Procne's noble son was slain,  
 murdered by his mother's hands and made,  
 I say, the Muses' sacrifice.  
 She had but that one son,  
 while you, poor wretch, had three,  
 all murdered by your madness.

What dirge, what song  
shall I sing for the dead? 1025  
What dance shall I dance for death?

*(The great central doors of the palace slide slowly apart  
revealing, in the center court, Heracles asleep, bound  
to a broken pillar. The bodies of Megara and the  
children beside him are wheeled on the stage  
in the eccyclema.)*

Ah, look!  
Look: the great doors  
of the palace slide apart! 1030

Look there!  
Look: the children's corpses  
beside their wretched father.  
How terribly he lies asleep  
after his children's slaughter!

Ropes around his body,  
knotted cords bind Heracles,  
cables lash him down  
to the pillars of his house. 1035

Here the old man comes, dragging behind  
with heavy steps, mourning in bitterness  
like some bird whose unfledged covey is slain. 1040

*Amphitryon*

Hush, old men of Cadmus' city,  
and let him sleep. Hush:  
let him forget his grief.

*Chorus*

I weep for you, old friend,  
for these boys, and for that head  
that wore the victor's crown. 1045

*Amphitryon*

Stand further off: not a sound,  
not a cry. His sleep is deep,  
his sleep is calm. Let him lie.

*Chorus*

What murder . . . 1050

*Amphitryon*

Hush! Be still: you add but grief.

*Chorus*

. . . poured out, piled high!

*Amphitryon*

Softly, gently, old friends. Mourn  
in quiet: not a word, not a cry.  
If he awakes and breaks his bonds, 1055  
he will destroy us all:  
father, city, and his house.

*Chorus*

I cannot hold my grief.

*Amphitryon*

Hush:  
let me hear his breathing.

*Chorus*

Does he sleep? 1060

*Amphitryon*

He sleeps, but sleeps  
as dead men do, because he slew his wife  
and killed his sons with twanging bow.

*Chorus*

Grieve then, mourn!

*Amphitryon*

I mourn, I grieve.

1065

*Chorus*

Mourn for these dead children.

*Amphitryon*

Ah. . . .

*Chorus*

Mourn your son, grieve for him.

*Amphitryon*

Ah. . . .

*Chorus*

Old friend. . . .

*Amphitryon*

Hush, be still:

he stirs and turns! He wakes! Quick,  
let me hide myself in darkness here.

1070

*Chorus*

Courage: darkness lies upon his eyes.

*Amphitryon*

Take care, take care. My grief is such,  
I have no fear to leave the light and die.  
But if he murders me who begot him,  
he shall add a greater grief to these,  
and have on him the curse of father's blood.

1075

*Chorus*

Best for you it would have been  
if you had died that very day  
you took revenge on those who slew  
the kinsmen of your wife, the day  
you sacked the city of the Taphians!

1080

*Amphitryon*

Run, run, old friends, back from the house,  
away! He wakes! Run, run  
from his reawakened rage!  
He wakes to pile murder on murder,  
to dance madness through all Thebes! 1085

*Chorus*

O Zeus, why have you hated him so much,  
your own son? Why launched him on this sea of grief?

*Heracles*

How now?  
I do breathe . . . what I ought to see, I see:  
heaven and earth, the gleaming shafts of the sun. . . . 1090  
But how strangely my muddled senses swim,  
as on a choppy sea . . . my breath comes warm,  
torn up unsteadily from heaving lungs. . . .  
And look: I sit here, like a ship lashed tight  
with cables binding my chest and arms, 1095  
moored to a piece of broken masonry;  
and there, close beside me, corpses lie . . .  
and my bow and arrows littered on the ground,  
those faithful former comrades of my arms,  
that guarded my chest, and I guarded them. 1100  
Have I come back to Hades? Have I run  
Eurystheus' race again? Hades? But how?  
No, for I see no rock of Sisyphus,  
no Pluto, no queen Demeter's sceptre.  
I am bewildered. Where could I be helpless? 1105  
Help! Is there some friend of mine, near or far,  
who could help me in my bewilderment?  
For all I took for granted now seems strange. . . .

*Amphitryon*

Old friends, shall I approach my affliction?

*Chorus*

Go, and I'll go with you, sharing in your grief. 1110

*Heracles*

Why do you cry, Father, and hide your eyes?  
Why do you stand off from the son you love?

*Amphitryon*

O my son, my son, whatever you have done. . . .

*Heracles*

What have I done that you should weep for it?

*Amphitryon*

Even a god would weep, if he knew it. 1115

*Heracles*

A great grief it must be; but you hide it.

*Amphitryon*

It is there to see, if you could but see it.

*Heracles*

Tell me if you mean my life is not the same.

*Amphitryon*

Tell me if you are sane; then I shall speak.

*Heracles*

O gods, how ominous these questions are! 1120

*Amphitryon*

I wonder even now if you are not mad. . . .

*Heracles*

Mad? I cannot remember being mad.

*Amphitryon*

Friends, shall I loose his ropes? What should I do?

*Heracles*

Tell me who bound me! Who disgraced me so?

HERACLES

*Amphitryon*

Your troubles are enough. Let the others go. 1125

*Heracles*

I say no more. Will you tell me now?

*Amphitryon*

O Zeus, do you see these deeds Hera has done?

*Heracles*

Is it from *her* hate our sufferings come?

*Amphitryon*

Let the goddess go. Shoulder your own grief.

*Heracles*

I am ruined. Your words will be disaster. 1130

*(Amphitryon removes the shrouds from the  
children's corpses.)*

*Amphitryon*

Look. Look at the bodies of your children.

*Heracles*

Oh horrible! What awful sight is this?

*Amphitryon*

Your unnatural war against your sons.

*Heracles*

War? What war do you mean? Who killed these boys?

*Amphitryon*

You and your bow and some god are all guilty. 1135

*Heracles*

What! I did it? O Father, herald of evil!



*Amphitryon*

You were mad. Your questions asked for grief.

*Heracles*

And it was I who murdered wife as well?

*Amphitryon*

All this was the work of your hand alone.

*Heracles*

O black night of grief which covers me!

1140

*Amphitryon*

It was because of that you saw me weep.

*Heracles*

Did I ruin all my house in my madness?

*Amphitryon*

I know but this: everything you have is grief.

*Heracles*

Where did my madness take me? Where did I die?

*Amphitryon*

By the altar, as you purified your hands.

1145

*Heracles*

Why then am I so sparing of this life,

born the killer of my dearest sons?

Let me avenge my children's murder:

let me hurl myself down from some sheer rock,

or drive the whetted sword against my side,

or expunge with fire this body's madness

and burn away this guilt which sticks to my life!

1150

(*He glances to the right and sees Theseus approaching.*)

But look: Theseus comes, my friend and kinsman,  
intruding on my strategies for death.

# HERACLES

And seeing me, the taint of murdered sons  
shall enter at the eye of my dearest friend. 1155  
What shall I do? Where can this shame be hid?  
Oh for wings to fly! to plunge beneath the earth!  
Here: let my garments hide my head in darkness,  
in shame, in horror of this deed I did, 1160  
and so concealed, I'll shelter him from harm,  
and keep pollution from the innocent.

*(Enter Theseus, unattended.)*

*Theseus*

I come, old man, leading the youth of Athens,  
bringing alliance to your son; my men  
wait under arms by the stream of Asopos. 1165  
A rumor came to Erechtheus' city  
that Lycus had seized the sceptre of this land  
and was engaged in war against your house.  
And so, in gratitude to Heracles  
who saved me from Hades, I have come, 1170  
old man, if you should need a helping hand.

*(He sees the corpses of the children.)*

Ah!

What bodies are these scattered on the ground?  
Have I arrived too late, preceded here  
by some disaster? Who killed these boys?  
That woman lying there, whose wife was she? 1175  
Children are not mustered on the field of war:  
no, this is some newer sorrow I find here.

*Amphitryon*

O lord of the olive-bearing hill. . . .

*Theseus*

Why do you speak in those heavy tones of grief?

*Amphitryon*

See what grief the gods have given. 1180

*Theseus*

Whose children are these over whom you mourn?

*Amphitryon*

O gods, my son begot these boys,  
begot them, killed them, his own blood.

*Theseus*

Unsay those words!

*Amphitryon*

Would that I could! 1185

*Theseus*

Oh horrible tale!

*Amphitryon*

We are ruined and lost.

*Theseus*

How did it happen? Tell me how.

*Amphitryon*

Dead in the blow of madness,  
by arrows dipped in the blood  
of the hundred-headed hydra. . . . 1190

*Theseus*

This is Hera's war. Who lies there by the bodies?

*Amphitryon*

My son, my most unhappy son,  
who fought with giant-killing spear  
beside the gods at Phlegraia.

*Theseus*

What mortal man was ever cursed like this? 1195

*Amphitryon*

Among all men you would not find,

# HERACLES

greater wretchedness, greater suffering  
than this.

*Theseus*

Why does he hide his head beneath his robes?

*Amphitryon*

Shame of meeting your eye,  
shame before friends and kin, 1200  
shame for his murdered sons.

*Theseus*

I come to share his grief. Uncover him.

*Amphitryon*

My son, drop your robe from your eyes,  
show your forehead to the sun. 1205  
A friend has come, a rival weight  
to counterpoise your grief.  
O my son, I implore you,  
by your beard, your knees, your hand,  
by an old man's tears: 1210  
tame that lion of your rage  
that roars you on to death,  
yoking grief to grief.

*Theseus*

I call on you, huddled there in misery:  
lift up your head and show your face to friends. 1215  
There is no cloud whose utter blackness  
could conceal in night a sorrow like yours.  
Why wave me off, warning me of blood?  
Are you afraid mere words would pollute me?  
What do I care if your misfortunes fall 1220  
on me? You were my good fortune once:  
you saved me from the dead, brought me back to light.  
I loathe a friend whose gratitude grows old,  
a friend who takes his friend's prosperity

but will not voyage with him in his grief. 1225  
 Rise up; uncover that afflicted head  
 and look on us. This is courage in a man:  
 to bear unflinchingly what heaven sends.

*(He raises Heracles to his feet and uncovers his head.)*

*Heracles*

Theseus, have you seen this field of fallen sons?

*Theseus*

I heard. I see the grief to which you point. 1230

*Heracles*

How could you then uncloak me to the sun?

*Theseus*

No mortal man can stain what is divine.

*Heracles*

Away, rash friend! Flee my foul pollution.

*Theseus*

Where there is love contagion cannot come.

*Heracles*

I thank you. How right I was to help you once. 1235

*Theseus*

You saved me then, and now I pity you.

*Heracles*

A man to be pitied: I slew my children.

*Theseus*

My tears, my gratitude, I mourn your grief.

*Heracles*

Have you ever seen more misery than this?

*Theseus*

Your wretchedness towers up and touches heaven. 1240

*Heracles*

Then where it touches heaven, I shall strike.

*Theseus*

What do you think the gods care for your threats?

*Heracles*

Heaven is proud. And I am proud to heaven.

*Theseus*

No more: your presumption will be punished.

*Heracles*

My hold is full: there is no room for more. 1245

*Theseus*

What will you do? Where does your passion run?

*Heracles*

To death: to go back whence I came, beneath the earth.

*Theseus*

These are the words of an ordinary man.

*Heracles*

Will you, who did not suffer, preach to me?

*Theseus*

Is this that Heracles who endured so much? 1250

*Heracles*

Not so much. Endurance has an end.

*Theseus*

Mankind's benefactor, man's greatest friend?

*Heracles*

What good are men to me? Hera rules.

*Theseus*

You die so mean a death? Hellas forbids it.

*Heracles*

Listen: let me tell you what makes a mock 1255

at your advice. Let me show you my life:  
a life not worth living now, or ever.

Take my father first, a man who killed  
my mother's father and having such a curse,  
married Alcmene who gave birth to me. 1260

When a house is built on poor foundations,  
then its descendants are the heirs of grief.

Then Zeus—whoever Zeus may be—begot me  
for Hera's hatred. Take no offense, old man,  
for I count you my father now, not Zeus. 1265

While I was still at suck, she set her snakes  
with gorgon eyes to slither in my crib  
and strangle me. And when I grew older  
and a belt of muscle bound my body—  
why recite all those labors I endured? 1270

All those wars I fought, those beasts I slew,  
those lions and triple-bodied Typhons,  
giants, and four-legged Centaur hordes!  
I killed the hydra, that hound whose heads  
grew back as soon as lopped. My countless labors done, 1275  
I descended down among the sullen dead  
to do Eurystheus' bidding and bring to light  
the triple-headed hound who guards the gates of hell.

And now my last worst labor has been done:  
I slew my children and crowned my house with grief. 1280

And this is how I stand: I cannot stay  
with those I love at Thebes. If I remain,  
what temple, what assembly of my friends  
will have me? My curse is unapproachable.  
Go to Argos then? No, I am banished there. 1285

Settle in some other city then,  
 where notoriety shall pick me out  
 to be watched and goaded by bitter gibes—  
 "Is this the son of Zeus, who killed his wife  
 and sons? Away with him! Let him die elsewhere." 1290  
 [To a man who prospers and is blessed,  
 all change is grief; but the man who lives  
 akin to trouble minds disaster less.]  
 But to this pitch of grief my life has come:  
 the earth itself will groan, forbidding me 1295  
 to touch the ground, rivers and seas cry out  
 against my crossing-over, and I am  
 like Ixion, bound forever to a wheel.  
 This is the best, that I be seen no more  
 in Hellas, where I prospered and was great. 1300  
 Why should I live? What profit have I,  
 having a life both useless and accursed?  
 Let the noble wife of Zeus begin the dance,  
 pounding with her feet Olympus' gleaming floors!  
 For she accomplished what her heart desired, 1305  
 and hurled the greatest man of Hellas down  
 in utter ruin. Who could offer prayers  
 to such a goddess? Jealous of Zeus  
 for a mortal woman's sake, she has destroyed  
 Hellas' greatest friend, though he was guiltless. 1310

*Theseus*

No other god is implicated here,  
 except the wife of Zeus. Rightly you judge.  
 My advice is this: be patient, suffer  
 what you must, and do not yield to grief.  
 Fate exempts no man; all men are flawed,  
 and so the gods, unless the poets lie. 1315  
 Do not the gods commit adultery?  
 Have they not cast their fathers into chains,  
 in pursuit of power? Yet all the same,  
 despite their crimes, they live upon Olympus.  
 How dare you then, mortal that you are, 1320



to protest your fate, when the gods do not?

Obeys the law and leave your native Thebes  
and follow after me to Pallas' city.

There I shall purify your hands of blood,  
give you a home and a share of my wealth. 1325

All those gifts I have because I killed  
the Minotaur and saved twice seven youths,  
I cede to you. Everywhere throughout my land,  
plots of earth have been reserved for me.

These I now assign to you, to bear your name 1330  
until you die. And when you go to Hades,  
Athens shall raise you up a monument  
of stone, and honor you with sacrifice.

And so my city, helping a noble man,  
shall win from Hellas a lovely crown of fame. 1335

This thanks and this return I make you now,  
who saved me once. For now you need a friend.  
[He needs no friends who has the love of gods.  
For when god helps a man, he has help enough.]

### *Heracles*

Ah, all this has no bearing on my grief; 1340  
but I do not believe the gods commit  
adultery, or bind each other in chains.  
I never did believe it; I never shall;  
nor that one god is tyrant of the rest.  
If god is truly god, he is perfect, 1345  
lacking nothing. These are poets' wretched lies.

Even in my misery I asked myself,  
would it not be cowardice to die?  
The man who cannot bear up under fate  
could never face the weapons of a man. 1350  
I shall prevail against death. I shall go  
to your city. I accept your countless gifts.  
For countless were the labors I endured;  
never yet have I refused, never yet  
have I wept, and never did I think 1355  
that I should come to this: tears in my eyes.

# HERACLES

But now, I see, I must serve necessity.

And now you see me banished, old man;  
you see in me the killer of my sons.

Give them to the grave, give them the tribute 1360  
of your tears, for the law forbids me this.

Let them lie there in their mother's arms,  
united in their grief, as they were then,  
before, in ignorance, I killed them all.

And when the earth conceals their small remains,  
live on in this city here, and though it hurt, 1365  
compel your soul to bear misfortune with me.

O my sons, the father who gave you life  
has slain you all, and never shall you reap  
that harvest of my life, all I labored for,  
that heritage of fame I toiled to leave you. 1370  
You too, poor wife, I killed: unkind return  
for having kept the honor of my bed,  
for all your weary vigil in my house.

O wretched wife and sons! Wretched father!  
In grief I now unyoke myself from you. 1375  
O bitter sweetness of this last embrace!

*(He turns from his final farewell to his wife and  
children and picks up his bow and arrows.)*

O my weapons, bitter partners of my life!  
What shall I do? Let you go, or keep you,  
knocking against my ribs and always saying,  
"With us you murdered wife and sons. Wearing us, 1380  
you wear your children's killers." Can that be worn?  
What could I reply? Yet, naked of these arms,  
with which I did the greatest deeds in Hellas,  
must I die in shame at my enemies' hands?  
No, they must be borne; but in pain I bear them. 1385

Hold with me, Theseus, in one thing more.  
Help me take to Argos the monstrous dog,  
lest, alone and desolate of sons, I die.

O land of Cadmus, O people of Thebes,  
mourn with me, grieve with me, attend my children 1390

to the grave! And with one voice mourn us all,  
the dead and me. For all of us have died,  
all struck down by one blow of Hera's hate.

*Theseus*

Rise up, unfortunate friend. Have done with tears.

*Heracles*

I cannot rise. My limbs are rooted here. 1395

*Theseus*

Then necessity breaks even the strong.

*Heracles*

Oh to be a stone! To feel no grief!

*Theseus*

Enough. Give your hand to your helping friend.

*Heracles*

Take care. I may pollute your clothes with blood.

*Theseus*

Pollute them then. Spare not. I do not care. 1400

*Heracles*

My sons are dead; now you shall be my son.

*Theseus*

Place your hand on my shoulder. I shall lead you.

*Heracles*

A yoke of love, but one of us in grief.

O Father, choose a man like this for friend.

*Amphitryon*

The land that gave him birth has noble sons. 1405

*Heracles*

Theseus, turn me back. Let me see my sons.

HERACLES

*Theseus*

Is this a remedy to ease your grief?

*Heracles*

I long for it, yearn to embrace my father.

*Amphitryon*

My arms are waiting. I too desire it.

*Theseus*

Have you forgotten your labors so far?

1410

*Heracles*

All those labors I endured were less than these.

*Theseus*

If someones sees your weakness, he will not praise you.

*Heracles*

I live: am I so low? You did not think so once.

*Theseus*

Once, no. But where now is famous Heracles?

*Heracles*

What were you when you were underground?

1415

*Theseus*

In courage I was the least of men.

*Heracles*

Then will you say my grief degrades me now?

*Theseus*

Forward!

*Heracles*

Farewell, father!

*Amphitryon*

Farewell, my son.

*Heracles*

Bury my children.

*Amphitryon*

Who will bury me?

*Heracles*

I.

1420

*Amphitryon*

When will you come?

*Heracles*

When you bury them.

*Amphitryon*

How?

*Heracles*

I shall have them brought from Thebes to Athens.  
Take my children out, take them to their graves,  
while I, whose whole house has gone down in grief,  
am towed in Theseus' wake like some little boat.  
The man who would prefer great wealth or strength  
more than love, more than friends, is diseased of soul.

1425

*Chorus*

We go in grief, we go in tears,  
who lose in you our greatest friend.

*(Theseus and Heracles leave by the left. The chorus  
goes to the right, while Amphitryon slowly follows  
the eccyclema with the bodies of Megara and  
the children inside the palace. The great  
doors close behind them.)*

# IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Translated by*

WITTER BYNNER

*Introduction by*

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## INTRODUCTION TO IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

### *The Date*

There is no external evidence for the date of *Iphigenia in Tauris* (it should be *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, but the other title has become regular through use); it has, however, been generally placed between 414 and 410 B.C., and there are good reasons for this. Meter is an excellent guide in dating the plays of Euripides, and metrically this play is similar to *The Trojan Women* (415), *Electra* (413), and *Helen* (412). In structure and plot *Iphigenia* is a romance or romantic comedy, and Euripides at this time seems to have been much interested in the possibilities of this type of play. The plots of *Iphigenia* and *Helen* are in many ways almost identical. In both, a woman who has been miraculously transported to the barbaric ends of the earth (Scythia, Egypt) and there held in honorable captivity is convinced, on the slightest kind of evidence, that the man in the world she loves most (brother, husband), her sole possible deliverer, is dead. Almost immediately she meets this very man and, after some misunderstanding, rushes into his arms in a joyful recognition scene. She then, with female guile (women, to Euripides, are more strategic than men) contrives their escape by working on the simple piety of the barbarian king, whose vengefulness is dispelled by the appearance of divinities (Athena, the Heavenly Twins), and all end at peace in the prospect of a happy future. This similarity might, however, be less striking if we possessed the lost plays of Euripides, since it is clear that he wrote many romantic comedies. *Ion* (possibly 411 B.C.) shares some of these features (supposed death and miraculous transportation, catastrophe barely averted, climax in recognition, happy ending) but is an example of the purer foundling-story. Our tenta-



tive date also goes well with the fact that at the end of his career Euripides was much interested in exploring the ramifications of the saga of the House of Atreus (*Electra*, 413; *Helen*, 412; *Orestes*, about 408; *Iphigenia at Aulis*, posthumous), though the plays do not connect with each other and often conflict in choice of legendary variants.

*Iphigenia* was probably not produced with *Electra* in 413, since Orestes appears in both plays but with rather different characteristics, and since the predictions at the end of *Electra* ignore the expedition to the Taurians; nor, probably, was it produced with *Helen* in 412, since the dramas are too much alike to have been given together. We must then choose between 414 and 411 (the style is not "late" enough for any posterior date); my own uncertain choice is 414.

### *The Play*

*Iphigenia in Tauris* was of course presented as a tragedy, but it is not "tragical" like *Medea* or *Hippolytus*. The formulae by which we are accustomed to interpret tragedy—the tragic fault or tragic choice (*hamartia*), the punishment of *hybris* (whatever that means), the irreconcilable conflict of characters, or justified revenge breeding new hatred and wrong—do not apply here and can be blissfully ignored. Euripides is more interested in How than in Why, and even as romantic comedy *Iphigenia* is less seriously problematical, cuts less deep, than *Alcestis* or *Ion*. Note how briskly the murder of Clytemnestra is disposed of, lines 924–27.

But the cheerfulness is serious, and in it I find two dominant ideals. One is the love of Greece. Euripides has been sobered by the horrors of internecine war, and has dropped the narrow, often bellicose pro-Athenian theme, which appears in *Heracleidae* and *Andromache* and *The Suppliants*, in favor of a wider Hellenism. His homesick Greeks find no comfort in even the friendliness of outlanders and long for Greece, all Greece or any of Greece, not merely Athens. The other ideal is friendship, the devoted, disinterested friendship of Admetus, Heracles, and Apollo in *Alcestis*, of Heracles and

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Theseus in *Heracles*, of Orestes, Pylades, and Electra in *Orestes* (a trio of cutthroats, to be sure, but their love seems to be real), and of the three friends here. Friendship and the love of Greek for Greek may indeed be symbolized for Euripides during this period in those Dorian twins, Castor and Polydeuces (Pollux) who appear at the end of *Helen* and *Electra*. Polydeuces refused to survive his brother. The twins have no place in this story; yet Euripides goes out of his way to bring them in (l. 272), since they are the prototypes and patrons of those who put all selfishness aside and make the fortunes of their friends their own.

### *The Translation*

The editors asked the distinguished poet Witter Bynner for permission to use his translation originally made in 1915. This translation seemed to them to be in many ways the first modern translation. The present text represents Mr. Bynner's carefully polished revision of a manuscript created under circumstances best recounted by him:

It might be wondered, when what little Greek I had learned at college was forgotten, why and how I came to venture a version in English of a Euripidean play.

In 1914, Isadora Duncan with her six dancers had for some time been bringing Greek figures and friezes to life on the stages of several nations. Almost everyone connected in those days with any of the arts knew Isadora; and when she had been given use of the New Theater near Columbus Circle in New York, later called the Century Theater, we often heard her wish for a "right translation" of a Greek play to produce there. She had removed orchestra seats to make a deep-aproned stage on which she offered almost daily, at public performances, her rehearsals and experiments in dance and drama. Charging dearly for what lower seats were left but only ten cents for a gallery seat, she attracted substantial and ardent audiences to an exciting laboratory unique in American history. After her production of *Oedipus Rex*—the lead well played by her brother, Augustin—she kept begging me to try my hand at a version of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, which, she said from some knowledge or other, "though superbly simple in the original, had never been humanly translated into Eng-

lish, but always with stilted inversions and scholarly heaviness, and the sense subjected to the sound."

She made me try it, the choruses first. Scenes of the play were to follow and be combined into growing length for performance, as fast as I could write them. We had put on the stage all of the choruses, for Margherita Duncan and Helen Freeman, besides the six girls and herself, before someone discovered and reported that by living in the theater's large, luxurious dressing-rooms Isadora and her group were breaking New York's fire regulations. So the whole experiment ended. But I finished the play, which was published as a single volume in 1915 and again, as part of my *Book of Plays*, in 1922. Both times, forgetting that we had omitted certain sections of the choruses which Isadora had thought too remotely allusive to be understood or effective, I neglected to restore them for print. They are included, however, in the present volume. I must add that in making the text for Isadora I relied only on close study of all English versions available. In revising it through the past two years, I have kept the choruses more or less as they were, a sort of musical accompaniment to the drama, but have otherwise written and discarded some seven manuscripts, with the devoted intent that what I could do for it might become ever simpler, clearer, and worthier of the humanist who wrote it.

For general accuracy, this new version has had the supervision of Richmond Lattimore, who instigated my endeavor to make it a still more human play in 1955 than the earlier version seemed to be in 1915. I repeat at this time the original dedication to my friend Barry Faulkner, the then young painter who helpfully watched the growth of the first version forty years ago.



CHARACTERS

*Iphigenia*

*Pylades*

*Orestes*

*Temple Maidens*

*The Herdsman*

*Soldiers*

*King Thoas*

*Athena*

## IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

SCENE: *Out of a temple by the seaside in Tauris, down steps leading to a blood-stained altar seen through its door, comes Iphigenia, the High Priestess, and stands alone on the stairway above the empty court.*

### *Iphigenia*

Pelops, the son of Tantalus, by maiming  
A chariot, won a bride, who bore him Atreus,  
And Atreus had two sons, one Menelaus,  
The other Agamemnon, who in turn  
By Clytemnestra had a child, and I  
Am she, Iphigenia.

5

People believe  
That I was sacrificed by my own father  
To Artemis, in the great pursuit of Helen,  
Upon an altar near the bay of Aulis,  
There where the long deep waves are caught and broken  
Hither and thither by the winds, the bay  
Where Agamemnon's fleet, his thousand ships  
From Hellas, waited to avenge on Troy  
The wrong done Menelaus through the loss  
Of Helen. But a storm came up and still  
Another storm and neither sea nor wind  
Would favor Agamemnon. So he asked  
Calchas, the soothsayer, to consult the flame.  
And this is what was answered: "Agamemnon,  
Captain of Hellas, there can be no way  
Of setting your ships free, till the offering  
You promised Artemis is given Her.

10

15

· You had vowed to render Her in sacrifice 20  
 The loveliest thing each year should bear. You have owed  
 Long since the loveliness which Clytemnestra  
 Had borne to you, your daughter, Iphigenia.  
 Summon your daughter now and keep your word."

They sent Odysseus and his artful tongue  
 To lure me from my mother by pretending  
 That I should wed Achilles. When I had come 25  
 To Aulis, they laid hands on me. The flame  
 Was lit. The blow would have been struck—I saw  
 The knife. But Artemis deceived their eyes  
 With a deer to bleed for me and stole me through  
 The azure sky. And then She set me down  
 Here in this town of Tauris, this abode 30  
 Of savage men ruled by their uncouth king,  
 Thoas, a horseman headlong as the wind,  
 Who stationed me High Priestess in Her temple,  
 And still I serve Her on Her festal days.  
 Service may seem a holy word. But far 35  
 From holy are these orders I am bound  
 To obey, never to question: Her command that I  
 Must serve to Her the lives of foreigners.  
 It was a custom long before I came,  
 An ancient cruel custom. Can She hear me?  
 My hands prepare the victims. Other hands,  
 There in the inner temple, spill the blood, 40  
 Which then is poured upon this altar-stone.

*(She descends the steps into the court.)*

I dreamed last night a deathly dream. Perhaps  
 The morning will dispel it if I speak it—  
 I dreamed that I was far beyond the seas.  
 I seemed to be at home again in Argos,  
 Asleep among my maidens—when a roll 45  
 Of thunder shook the ground. I ran outside.  
 I watched the house. I saw the coping fall,  
 The cross-beams stir and yield, break and give way,  
 Then the whole palace plunge from roof to base,

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Only one column left upright in all 50  
 My father's house. But that one stood alive,  
 A man with bright brown hair and breathing lips.  
 And then against my will my hand went out,  
 As it does toward strangers here condemned to die,  
 And touched his forehead with this fatal water—  
 And with water of my tears, because I knew  
 The dream was of Orestes and his end. 55  
 The pillar of a family is the son.  
 This water is the certain sign of death.  
 It could not mean my family next of kin;  
 Strophius, my uncle, never had a son.  
 It was my brother whom I touched with tears— 60  
 For whom I now must pour a funeral-urn,  
 All I can do for one so far away.

*(Climbing the steps.)*

Where are the women from Greece the King appointed  
 To live with me and help me here in the temple?  
 I wonder where they are. I need their help. 65

*The voice of Orestes*

Keep a sharp lookout. Somebody may be coming.

*Pylades*

*(Entering by the path from the bay.)*

I have looked in both directions and there's no one.

*Orestes*

*(Following him and gazing at the temple.)*

Is this the shrine of Artemis we have sailed  
 So many seas to find since we left Argos?  
 Is it, O Pylades? Is this the shrine? 70

*Pylades*

I think it is, Orestes. So do you.



*Orestes*

And might that stone be stained with blood of Greeks?

*Pylades*

If ever I saw blood—look, on the edge!

*Orestes*

Look, near the roof! Belongings of the dead!

*Pylades*

Trophies of foreigners these men have murdered!

75

*Orestes*

Careful!

O Phoebus, why must Thy oracle  
Bring this on me again, the sight of blood  
Again? Have I not seen enough of blood?  
My mother shed my father's blood, I hers.  
And then the Furies, with their eyes bloody,  
Hunted me, hounded me across the land

80

Until at last I ran to Thee and begged  
An end of all the cycles of despair  
That sped me, hurled me, maddened me through Hellas.  
The answer was, "Go to the Taurian country  
Where Artemis, my sister, has a shrine.

85

Find there Her statue which had fallen down  
From Heaven. Then prove yourself a man able  
Enough or fortunate enough to steal it,  
Stalwart enough to face all risk and bring it  
Home to the holy land of Attica."

90

Although no more was said, I understood  
That this would mean the end of my afflictions.  
And here I am, O Phoebus, far from home  
On a misbegotten shore—doing Thy will.

But Pylades, my fellow venturer,  
Where can we turn? What man could possibly  
Scale these high walls? Or climb the open stairs  
And not be seen? Or force the brazen locks

95

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Without whoever is behind them hearing?  
 If we are caught, it will be certain death, 100  
 Your death as well as mine. Even this waiting,  
 Wondering what to do, may cost our lives.  
 Enough of it! Enough! Back to the ship!

*Pylades*

What do we know of flight? How should we dare  
 To take a course of which our hearts know nothing?  
 Why should we disobey Apollo's order, 105  
 Do him dishonor? No, we shall find a way.  
 Come, let us leave the temple, let us look  
 For a dark cave to hide in. Not the ship!  
 By now they must have spied the ship from shore.  
 They'd be ahead of us, catch us and end us. 110  
 Notice the opening between those beams?  
 It's wide enough. Under the night's dim eye  
 We could drop through and hoist a wooden statue.  
 A coward turns away but a brave man's choice 115  
 Is danger. And by all the Gods, shall we,  
 Coming this far, now at the end turn back?

*Orestes*

I should have been the one to say those words.  
 Yes, let us go and find a hiding-place,  
 Keep faith with Phoebus and deserve his help. 120  
 Have we not youth? Youth, with its fill of strength,  
 Turning away from any task should be ashamed.

*(They leave by the path to the shore. A great bell  
 rings. From the town side the Temple  
 Maidens assemble in the courtyard.)*

*A Maiden*

Let those who dwell close to these Clashing Rocks  
 That guard the Euxine Sea, 125  
 Keep silence now before Latona's daughter,  
 Artemis, Goddess of the pointed hills!

*(Turning toward the temple as the bell ceases.)*

O Artemis, I come  
On consecrated feet into Thy court,  
I hail Thee beautiful  
As the golden gleaming of Thy colonnades! 130

*A Second Maiden*

Thy priestess calls us, she who keeps Thy keys,  
Who left behind, for Thee,  
Her land of Hellas, the embattled towers,  
The shore of horses, and the quiet fields  
Wherein our fathers lived. 135  
And we obey her call to worship Thee  
In this embittered land,  
Far from Eurotas and from happiness.

*(Iphigenia enters from the temple, carrying a heavy golden urn.)*

*A Third Maiden*

*(Crossing to Iphigenia and taking it to hold for her.)*

O daughter of the king who gathered ships  
A thousand strong and led  
Unnumbered men against high-towering Troy,  
We heard your call and we have come to you.  
Why have you summoned us? 140  
What makes your cheek so thoughtful and so pale?  
What has your tongue to tell,  
That your brow is dark and bowed upon your hands?

*Iphigenia*

My maidens, listen. Listen while I tell  
What I have seen. The Muse has veiled Her face, 145  
And I am mourning for a dead kinsman.  
Last night in a dream I saw my family's ending,  
So grieve for me. I saw my brother dead. 150

# IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

The dream was clear. My father's house is fallen,  
 My race broken and gone, Orestes dead!  
 So grieve for all of us, for all his people. 155  
 Fate, in still scourging me, takes from all Argos  
 My only brother!

To the vanished dead  
 I shall now pour an offering, a gift 160  
 Upon the earth, commingled of the milk  
 Of mountain-kine and of the wine of Bacchus  
 And of the honey that the russet bees  
 Gathered, a soothing gift. This and my heart. 165

*(To the Third Maiden.)*

Give me the urn of gold which heavy holds  
 My tribute to the God of Death.

This urn,  
 Orestes, son of Agamemnon, you 170  
 Who are lying under the dark earth, I lift  
 And pour—for you. And may the sweetness reach  
 And ease your lips. Better I cannot give,  
 I cannot bring to you braids of my hair  
 And, crying, lay them down upon your grave. 175  
 Yet, though from childhood you have thought me dead,  
 I still can cry—far from my home and you.

## *A Fourth Maiden*

O Lady, woe is in me for your woe,  
 My words are like a song  
 Of old which mourners in the far-off East 180  
 Chant for the dead, reciting only death,  
 A requiem of hell,  
 A wail of no returning and no hope,  
 Using no note of glory,  
 Only the desolation of the grave. 185

## *The First Maiden*

Mourn for the sons of Atreus, in whose house  
 The hearth can never burn.

Mourn for their bitter heritage, a home  
 Which waits the coming of a happy king 190  
 But cannot give him welcome.  
 Trouble was born forever in their sky  
 When Pelops tricked a car  
 Of toppling horses out of the race for a bride.

*The Third Maiden*

Because of a golden lamb which long ago 195  
 Beckoned contesting men,  
 Mischief began to undermine your house.

*The Fourth Maiden*

Vengeance has made its unappeased way  
 With every dart of death 200  
 And visited your family one by one.  
 And now with eager hand  
 Fate is pursuing you. Your turn has come.

*Iphigenia*

Oh bitter my beginning in the womb  
 Of her who bore me, from the very night  
 When she conceived! Appointed by the Fates 205  
 To suffer in this world, I was a child  
 Accursed. Yet how she cherished me, her first-born,  
 And thrilled that I, of all the girls of Argos, 210  
 Should be a bride upon the way to Troy!

What had she borne me for and loved me for?—  
 To be destroyed by my own father's hand,  
 To come, behind the horses of delight, 215  
 Not to Achilles—but to grief and horror!

And now beside this melancholy sea  
 I live my days—lonely, no love, no friends,  
 Wife of no man and mother of no child. 220  
 I know no home. I sing no Argive song  
 With Argive women to the Queen of Heaven.  
 I weave upon the whirring loom no tale  
 Of Pallas routing Titans. . . . Oh, instead,

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

I face an altar soaked with bloody death. 225  
I hear the cry for pity and the moans  
Of men—a thing too hideous to be told.

Yet even that seems little to me now—  
Now that a throne is empty and his eyes 230  
Are done with weeping, as I wish mine were.  
I who have loved him through these lonely years  
Shall never see him now but as I left him,  
A little baby at his mother's breast—  
I who had thought to see him as a king. 235

*The Second Maiden*

(*Pointing.*)

That herdsman running, stumbling, from the beach!  
What can have happened there?  
(*They watch the sea-path.*)

*A Herdsman*

(*Entering out of breath.*)

O daughter of the house of Agamemnon,  
I bring you news!

*Iphigenia*

Urgent enough for this  
Rough outcry in the temple-yard? 240

*The Herdsman*

A ship  
From sea has passed through the Symplegades!  
And through the fog two fellows waded ashore,  
And never was a finer offering  
Than these two boys will be for Artemis!  
I have been sent to tell you to make ready. 245

*Iphigenia*

Where are they from?—what country? Could you say?

*The Herdsman*

From Hellas, but I couldn't say which part.

*Iphigenia*

What were their names? Perhaps you heard their names?

*The Herdsman*

One of them called the other Pylades.

*Iphigenia*

And the one who spoke?

*The Herdsman*

I didn't hear his name.

250

*Iphigenia*

Where were they captured?

*The Herdsman*

Right there on the shore.

*Iphigenia*

What were you herdsmen doing on the shore?

*The Herdsman*

Washing our cattle there.

*Iphigenia*

Tell me again.

255

How were they captured? This is the first time

In all the years I have been living here

That any of you ever brought a Greek

To be the offering. Never a Greek.

*The Herdsman*

Just as we drove our cattle from the woods

260

To that long hollow where the curving tide

Has cut away the cliff, where the beach-men rest

From purple-fishing, one of us ahead

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

Came stealing back on tiptoe and he warned us, 265  
 "Those are not men but Gods! Behind that rock!  
 Not men but Gods!" And then another herdsman  
 Caught sight of them, raised up his hands and prayed,  
 "Palaemon, born of a Sea-Goddess, Master of Ships, 270  
 Protect us, whether these boys be the Twins  
 Of Battle, sons and favorites of Zeus,  
 Or else be brothers of the Ocean Nymphs,  
 Be sons of Nereus, God of Waves like Theel!"  
 But another jeered at us and laughed out loud, 275  
 So that I thought the Gods would turn on him.  
 But he was sure there must have been a wreck,  
 And these were sailors looking for our cave  
 To hide in, having heard that strangers here  
 Are sacrificed. And he persuaded most 280  
 Of us, and we were thinking what to do,  
 When one of them ran out around the rock.  
 Just staring, not at us or anything  
 That we could see, but at the air and shook  
 And groaned, ducking his head from side to side  
 Behind his arms as if he'd gone insane.  
 And he was calling out, sharp as a hunter,  
 "Look, Pylades! O look at her! O look! 285  
 There! There! Surely you see her now!—that Fiend  
 From Hell! And on her head look at the snakes,  
 Their mouths wide open, writhing for my blood!  
 Here comes another one! And look at that one  
 Up on the cliff, vomiting fire on me,  
 Lifting my mother's body like a rock  
 So she can smash it down on me and kill me! 290  
 Pylades, help me! They are all around me!"  
 And we could tell, by the way he jerked his head  
 Whenever a dog barked or a cow mooed,  
 That if a Fury wasn't chasing him  
 He thought there was in every sound he heard.  
 He might have knocked us flat there in a row, 295  
 We were so stunned. Instead, drawing his sword,  
 He lunged into our cattle like a lion,



As if they were the Furies, ripped their sides  
 With all his might till blood was running down,  
 Staining the edge. We were just untrained herdsmen 300  
 Facing expert young swordsmen; but we saw  
 The cattle wounded and dying and we hunted  
 For sticks and stones and blew our shells for help  
 And pretty soon farmers enough had joined us  
 To fight. Then, as we slowly started forward, 305  
 His madness left him. I can see him now—  
 Standing a moment. While I watch he drops  
 In a heap and foaming at the lips. Once more  
 We started toward him with our sticks and stones,  
 But still, his comrade, unafraid of us, 310  
 Leaned down to wipe the frothy mouth and laid  
 A piece of linen over the face to shield it—  
 Till suddenly the fallen man stood up,  
 Calm and himself again, and faced the rush  
 Of rocks we heaved at him like breaking waves. 315  
 We crowded in on him from every side.  
 He gave one groan as we surrounded him,  
 Ready to capture him or finish him.  
 And then we heard his voice ring out and say, 320  
 "If this is death, let's meet it, Pylades,  
 Like men! Come on! Together! With our swords!"  
 The metal flashed at us. We backed and tricked them  
 Into the hollow. There, while some of us  
 Would run for cover, others could throw rocks 325  
 To draw the swordsmen off and then give way  
 And let the first lot rally with new armfuls.  
 And yet we couldn't seem to hit those fellows.  
 I don't see how it was, with all the stones  
 We threw at them, that hardly one went straight.  
 All we could manage was to wear them down 330  
 By working round each man, aiming our volleys  
 Just at his sword, which, once he lost his grip,  
 He was too winded to pick up again.

And when we took our prisoners to the king,  
 He told us we should bring them here, and you

Should get them ready for the sacrifice. 335

Ask Artemis to send us more of them,  
More sailor-boys from Greece, send them to Tauris,  
And let more men from Hellas pay with blood  
After their shouting for your blood at Aulis.

*The First Maiden*

This is no ordinary man who has come 340  
From shores of Hellas to an alien shore  
And battles like a God.

*Iphigenia*

Go back and bring me the two foreigners.  
I shall be waiting for them when you come.

(*The Herdsman leaves.*)

Poor heart of mine, which always hitherto  
Has been compassionate, tender toward strangers, 345  
And even yesterday felt a quick pang  
At thought of Greeks who might be lost in Tauris,  
A crushing dream has changed you overnight.  
For since Orestes is no more alive,  
Now, where my heart was, there is only stone. 350  
Strangers who come today, no matter who,  
Will find in me a woman beyond tears.

Unhappiness, O friends, can harden us  
Toward other sorrow harsher than our own.

If but some heaven-sent wind, forcing a ship  
Between the Clashing Rocks, might bring me Helen, 355  
The Helen whom I hate, and Menelaus,  
That I might make of them the sacrifice,  
Let a new Aulis expiate the old,  
And vent my vengeance! It was Helen's fault  
And his, that Greek hands lifted me at Aulis  
And led me like a beast where, at the altar,  
My father held the sacrificial knife. 360  
I live it all again. My fingers, groping,  
Go out to him like this and clutch his beard

And cling about his knees. I cry to him:  
 "It is you yourself, yourself, who brought me here,  
 You who deceived my maidens and my mother! 365  
 They sing my marriage-song at home, they fill  
 The house with happiness, while all the time  
 Here am I dying at my father's hands!  
 You led me in your chariot to take  
 Achilles for my lord, but here is death 370  
 And the taste of blood, not kisses, on my lips!"

And I had left my home with my white veil  
 Drawn down. I had not taken in my arms  
 My brother—dead this day—nor kissed my sister.  
 I had saved all my kisses and embraces 375  
 For the man I was to marry. Even then  
 My heart was homesick and was faint with hope  
 That I should soon be back again in Argos.

And now, O dead Orestes, you, as I,  
 Forfeit your heritage and lose your home.

And what does Artemis ask of me here?— 380  
 She who forbids approach by any man  
 Whose hand is stained with bloodshed or with touch  
 Of childbirth or of burial, finds him  
 Unclean and bans him. She so delicate  
 In all these ways will yet demand the blood  
 Of human beings on Her altar-stone!  
 It cannot be. How could Latona bear 385  
 To Zeus so cruel a daughter? It is not true.  
 It is as false as tales of Tantalus  
 Feeding the Gods a child. O Artemis,  
 These people, being murderers themselves,  
 Are charging Thee with their own wickedness. 390  
 No! I will not believe it of a God!

### *The Second Maiden*

O Clashing Rocks, under whose shadow the dark  
 Threat waits, though through this cleft  
 I fled safe, in her disguise as heifer  
 Pursued by the sharp stinging of the gadfly, 395

# IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

Fled beyond Europe's land  
 And Europe's sea, fled safe but sick at heart,  
 Away from home and kin,  
 Into the alien wilderness of Asia,  
 What sort of men would leave the holy streams  
 Of Dirce, or the reeds 400  
 Green-growing in Eurotas, to explore  
 A bitter beach, to dare these ominous rocks  
 Where the seas meet in fog,  
 Where Artemis, among Her colonnades  
 Demanding sacrifice, 405  
 Receives upon her altar human blood?

## *The Fourth Maiden*

Why have they urged the oarsmen of their ship  
 To shake the clinging sea  
 With a great stroke and to accelerate  
 With rush of rivalry the racing wind? 410  
 Was it to sweep the shores  
 For riches and to vie in bearing home,  
 Each to upbuild his house,  
 The treasures and the trophies of the world?  
 That glittering hope is immemorial  
 And beckons many men 415  
 To their undoing. Ever insatiate  
 They sail the sea and look to foreign towns  
 To fill their ships with spoil.  
 But some men never find prosperity,  
 For all their voyaging,  
 While others find it with no voyaging. 420

## *The Third Maiden*

How have they passed the peril of the Rocks  
 That Clash and of the coast  
 Of Phineus heavy with broken waves? 425  
 I wonder if they sailed across that reach  
 Of sea where mariners  
 Boast to have looked on Ocean's Fifty Daughters

Under the windowed waves,  
Hand in hand dancing, circling round and singing. 430

*The Fourth Maiden*

I wonder if their rudder steered them through  
That other reach of sea  
Where the south wind eases and the southwest wind  
Delights a sail and where the isles are white  
With birds that cover them,  
That rise and wheel and then curve back again,  
Where the wings of ocean brood  
And where Achilles races the dark waters. 435

*The First Maiden*

My Lady prayed that Fate might hither bring,  
On the way home from Troy,  
The cause of her great misery. Oh, would 440  
That Helen, Helen had been blown ashore,  
That on her fatal head  
For punishment the holy drops might fall  
And that my Lady's knife 445  
Might find in her the fitting sacrifice!

*The Second Maiden*

But I have prayed for a deliverer,  
Some mariner from Hellas  
Able to end my grief and set me free. 450  
Ever I go, though only in a dream,  
Back to my father's house.  
And few have greater riches than the joy  
That comes to us in visions,  
In dreams which nobody can take away. 455

*The Third Maiden*

Look, there they are! See the two men in chains!  
The herdsman told the truth.  
We must be quiet now for Artemis.

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*The Second Maiden*

Can hands even from Hellas be so useless  
Against this ritual! 460

*The Fourth Maiden*

O Artemis, if Tauris in Thy sight  
Win honor by such gift  
As never Greece would take, receive this blood! 465

*Iphigenia*

Once more I must believe that Artemis  
Desires this worship, once again I serve Her.

*(To some of the Soldiers, who bring in the  
two youths.)*

Loosen their hands. For in the temple court,  
As in the temple during consecration,  
Chains are unhallowed things.

*(To the Temple Maidens, who obey.)*

Enter the temple. 470  
Prepare the altar for the sacrifice.

*(Turning to the captives, with Soldiers still by them.)*

I wonder who your mother was, your father,  
Whether you have a sister who must lose  
Her brothers and lament their bravery.  
Fate comes and goes, invisible and mute, 475  
And never whispers where Her blow shall fall.  
None of us ever sees Her in the dark  
Or understands Her cruel mysteries.  
Tell me, unfortunate men, where are you from—  
You who are far from home and yet must go 480  
Farther away from home even than this?

*Orestes*

But who are you, feeling concern for us?  
What could we mean to you that you should care

And make it harder for us with your pity?  
 What good can come from meeting death with tears?  
 Only a fool, finding that he must meet it, 485  
 Wishes to talk about it. If a man  
 Is sorry for himself, he doubles death:  
 Is first a coward, then a coward's corpse.  
 So let a man accept his destiny,  
 No pity and no tears. The sacrifice 490  
 Is customary here. We knew it was.

*Iphigenia*

One of your names was told me by a herdsman.  
 May I know which of you is Pylades?

*Orestes*

He, if it does you any good to know.

*Iphigenia*

And from what town in Hellas? 495

*Orestes*

Does it matter?

*Iphigenia*

Brothers?

*Orestes*

We are—in everything but birth.

*Iphigenia*

What is your name?

*Orestes*

Call me unfortunate. 500

*Iphigenia*

That would be pity's name for you.

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Orestes*

Then say  
That I am nobody—safe from derision.

*Iphigenia*

Your name is too important to be told?

*Orestes*

Come, sacrifice my body, not my name!

*Iphigenia*

You will not name for me even your town? 505

*Orestes*

I am so soon a townsman of no town.

*Iphigenia*

Surely it is not much to tell me that.

*Orestes*

It is when one can say a town in Argos!

*Iphigenia*

Argos? Not Argos? You are not from Argos?

*Orestes*

My town, Mycenae, was a lordly place. 510

*Iphigenia*

Then what could make you leave it? Were you banished?

*Orestes*

In a way banished—banished by myself.

*Iphigenia*

How good it is to see a man from Argos! 515

*Orestes*

But not to be one in your company!



*Iphigenia*

And let me ask about another town.

*Orestes*

But why this questioning?

*Iphigenia*

What is the news

Of that most talked-of town in the whole world?

What is the news of Troy?

*Orestes*

By all the Gods,

I wish that I had never heard its name!

*Iphigenia*

But is it true that Troy is overthrown?

*Orestes*

Its towers lie broken in the dust.

520

*Iphigenia*

And Helen?

Has Menelaus taken Helen back?

*Orestes*

Yes, to the sorrow of a noble man.

*Iphigenia*

She has brought me sorrow too. Where is she now?

*Orestes*

Gone back with him to Sparta.

*Iphigenia*

How I hate

The name of Helen! How all Hellas hates it!

525

*Orestes*

I have my own reason for hating it.

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Iphigenia*

The Achaeans are safely home, as I have heard?

*Orestes*

Some of them are. It would take long to tell.

*Iphigenia*

But tell me all you can while there is time!

*Orestes*

Then ask me all you can and I will answer.

530

*Iphigenia*

The soothsayer, Calchas? Is he back from Troy?

*Orestes*

Mycenae people say that he is dead.

*Iphigenia*

Praise Artemis! And is Odysseus dead?

*Orestes*

Not back nor dead, they say. Still wandering.

*Iphigenia*

Oh how I hope he never reaches home!

535

*Orestes*

Why wish him worse than he has borne already?

*Iphigenia*

What of Achilles?

*Orestes*

Dead. The marriage planned  
At Aulis never happened.

*Iphigenia*

Those who know  
Know well that it was never meant to happen.

*Orestes*

Knowing so much, are you yourself from Hellas?

540

*Iphigenia*

I lived in Hellas, many years ago.

*Orestes*

No wonder you are asking all these questions.

*Iphigenia*

What of that king they called The Happy King?

*Orestes*

I know no happy king. Whom do you mean?

*Iphigenia*

King Agamemnon.

*Orestes*

What can I say of him?

545

Nothing at all of him. No, do not ask me.

*Iphigenia*

I beg you by the Gods do me that grace.

*Orestes*

The news is death—his and another death.

*Iphigenia*

O Agamemnon! O King Agamemnon!

*Orestes*

Can you be kin to him, you care so much?

550

*Iphigenia*

Remembering his love of life, his pride!

*Orestes*

All of it ended by a woman's hand.

*Iphigenia*

O miserable woman! Poor, poor king!

*Orestes*

I pray, I beg you, ask me no more questions.

*Iphigenia*

Only about his queen. Is she alive?

555

*Orestes (doggedly)*

His queen is dead. Her own son killed her.

*Iphigenia*

Why?

*Orestes*

To punish her for murdering his father.

*Iphigenia*

It was exact of him. I pity him.

*Orestes*

As well you may, since no God pities him.

560

*Iphigenia*

Of Agamemnon's children, who is left?

*Orestes*

Electra—but her husband far from her.

*Iphigenia*

The one they sacrificed—what do they say?

*Orestes*

Nothing of her, except that she is dead.

*Iphigenia*

And he could kill his child—that "happy king!"

565

*Orestes*

It was a wicked war for a wicked woman,  
And all the waste that has come from it is wicked.

*Iphigenia*

The son of the king? He too is dead in Argos!

*Orestes*

Not dead but not in Argos, not in Argos.

*(The Temple Maidens return to the court.)*

*Iphigenia (telling them)*

I dreamt Orestes dead! It was a lie!

*Orestes*

Dreams, lies, lies, dreams—nothing but emptiness! 570  
Even the Gods, with all Their name for wisdom,  
Have only dreams and lies and lose Their course,  
Blinded, confused, and ignorant as we.  
The wisest men follow their own direction  
And listen to no prophet guiding them.  
None but the fools believe in oracles,  
Forsaking their own judgment. Those who know,  
Know that such men can only come to grief. 575

*The Second Maiden*

Oh who will bring us news whether our kin  
Are living or are dead?

*Iphigenia*

*(To Orestes.)*

For years I have had a plan which now might serve  
As much to your advantage as to mine.  
Joint undertakings stand a better chance  
When they benefit both sides. So tell me this. 580  
Would you, if I could win you leave to do so,  
Go back to Argos, with a letter from me

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

Long ready for a friend of mine who lives there?  
 My words were written down by one who died  
 A victim here and yet was sorry for me, 585  
 Blaming his death on Artemis, not me.  
 No one had come from Hellas till you came,  
 No Greek who might be spared and take my letter. 590  
 But you are gentle, you are the very man  
 To carry it. You know the names of places  
 And of persons dear to me. And so I ask  
 Your help and in return could grant your life,  
 With one condition—that your friend shall pay 595  
 The price the state exacts for Artemis.

*Orestes*

Strange lady, you have made a fair proposal  
 Save in that one respect. What would my life  
 Be worth to me, gained by forsaking a friend?  
 I am the captain of this misadventure  
 And he the loyal shipmate who stayed by me. 600  
 A sorry ending if he paid the cost  
 And I rejected my own enterprise!  
 Your errand shall be done—but not by me.  
 Give him your confidence, give him your letter.  
 To you it makes no difference which of us  
 Carries your message home. To me it would make  
 No difference when or how my life should finish  
 If through continuing it, saving it, 605  
 I brought disaster on a friend and knew  
 No honor left in me, no faith, no love.  
 Besides, this man is dear to me, his life  
 Is even closer to me than my own.

*Iphigenia*

Your heart is made of gold. You must have come  
 From some great seed, to be so true a friend. 610  
 If only the last member of my line  
 Be such as you! I have a brother living,  
 Though face to face with him, I should not know him.

As you have chosen then, so let it be.  
 Your friend shall take the letter, and you prove  
 Your loyalty by giving him your life. 615

*Orestes*

Whose hand is it that brings the touch of death?

*Iphigenia*

My hand—condemned to it by Artemis.

*Orestes*

Your hand is still too young a hand for that.

*Iphigenia*

It is the law. 620

*Orestes*

That a woman shall stab men?

*Iphigenia*

Not that! Oh not the knife! Only the water,  
 The marking on the forehead—only the water!

*Orestes*

Whose hand then does the deed, uses the knife?

*Iphigenia*

Inside the temple—there are men for it.

*Orestes*

When I am burnt, what happens to my body? 625

*Iphigenia*

They seal the ashes in a rocky gorge.

*Orestes*

I wish my sister's hand might tend my body.

*Iphigenia*

Since she is far away and cannot hear you

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

Or be with you to give these services,  
 I shall attend to them. I am from Argos. 630  
 I will do everything that she might do,  
 Will bring rich robes to be your final clothing  
 And funeral ornaments to set about you  
 And yellow oil to pour, cooling and clean,  
 Upon the embers. I will melt your ashes  
 In gold that bees collect from mountain-flowers. 635  
 You shall be pure and sweet.

While I am gone  
 To find my letter, do not think ill of me.

*(To the soldiers.)*

Keep careful guard without binding these men.

*(To herself, pausing as she leaves the court.)*

Oh, if at last my letter should arrive  
 In Argos and be opened by his own  
 Beloved hand, a letter never dreamed of, 640  
 Then he would listen through my opening grave  
 And hear my living lips cry out to him.

*(She leaves, passing around the temple.)*

*The First Maiden*

O you whose head must feel this water's touch,  
 My heart goes out to you! 645

*Orestes*

Have hope for him, instead of pitying me.

*The First Maiden*

My heart both pities you and hopes for him  
 That he may safely reach  
 His father's country and be happy there.

*Pylades*

Could I desert a friend and still be happy? 650



*The First Maiden*

Or I help pitying a man who dies?

*The Fourth Maiden*

The one who lives will be the one I pity.

*The Third Maiden*

Which is the sadder fate?

*The Fourth Maiden*

I cannot tell. I watch and cannot tell  
Whether to pity you, or you, the more.

655

*Orestes*

What is it, Pylades? What puzzles you?

*Pylades*

What do you think it is that puzzles me?

*Orestes*

That woman and the way she put her questions.  
The sort of questions: the defeat of Troy,  
The Achaeans' homecoming, what happened to Calchas,  
To Achilles, and her being so concerned  
At Agamemnon's death and then inquiring  
About his wife and children. I believe  
It true that she herself belongs in Argos  
Or she would never send a letter there  
And care about occurrences in Argos  
As if they flowed within her very veins.

660

665

*Pylades*

Yes, that is what at first had puzzled me,  
And then I thought it natural enough  
That in a place even half civilized  
People should care about the fate of kings.  
But that was not what puzzled me, not that.

670

*Orestes*

If we put our heads together, we could surely—

*Pylades*

How can you wrong me, thinking I would live  
 And leave you here to die? I came with you. 675  
 I shall continue with you to the end,  
 Or I could never show my face again  
 On an Argive hill or in a Phocian valley  
 But to be pointed out and rightly spurned  
 As one who had betrayed a friend. People  
 Might say worse things than that, the worst 680  
 An evil mind could think of to enjoy:  
 That I had wished or even caused your death  
 To benefit, as husband of your sister,  
 By my inheritance—to win your throne.  
 Such thoughts are frightening, but worse my shame  
 In your imagining that I might leave you.  
 If you meet knife and flame, then so do I. 685  
 I am your friend and there's no more to say.

*Orestes*

How can you be my friend and yet refuse me?  
 The load I bear can never be laid down—  
 And would you add to it by lightening yours?  
 All the contempt you imagine from men's hearts  
 And tongues, falling on you, would fall on me 690  
 In my own heart from my own conduct, if I let  
 The service you have done me bring you harm.  
 What has Fate left me of my life to cherish  
 But a good ending? As for you, my comrade,  
 You have not any right to choose to die.  
 You have the blessing of your fortunate blood  
 To make you wish to live. I can but pray  
 That, by your living, solace may be brought 695  
 To my ill-fated family. Pylades,  
 Once home again and with your wife, my sister,  
 Give me my happiness by having a son  
 In whom my name shall live, and through your children

Build up once more the house of Agamemnon.  
 Go back, I say, and make my home your home.  
 You will be there in Hellas, on the shore  
 Where Argive horsemen ride. Give me your hand 700  
 And swear to me that you will build my tomb,  
 Will set memorials in it and will ask  
 My sister for a lock of her long hair  
 To lay with them. Tell her that I was led  
 Before this altar by a gentle hand,  
 A woman's hand, a woman born in Argos, 705  
 And how at last my blood was purified.  
 O Pylades, be gentle to my sister!  
 And so goodbye, my best and closest friend.  
 When we were boys, we loved sharing our sports.  
 You rode the hills with me. And now in manhood  
 You are the one who has shared the heartache with me 710  
 When treacherous Phoebus through his oracle  
 First lied to me, then tricked me, luring me far  
 From home, lest watchful eyes in Hellas see  
 That Gods as well as men break promises.  
 I trusted Him, with all my faith and will,  
 Even, at His command, killing my mother,  
 And in return He has forsaken me. 715

*Pylades*

I shall obey your will, though not my own;  
 Shall build your tomb in Hellas. Your heart knows  
 That I shall love your sister all my life.  
 And, close to you in your life, my heart knows  
 That it shall hold you closer in your death—  
 If death it be. Gods, in mysterious ways, 720  
 Never explaining, mask the face of life,  
 Behind what looks death, disguising life,  
 And then revealing it.

*Orestes*

The time is gone  
 When Gods might show that face. For she has come.

*Iphigenia*

*(Returning to the temple by the town-path and  
addressing the Attendants who follow her.)*

Precede me into the temple and be ready. 725

*(The Attendants enter the temple.)*

Here is my letter, safe within these folds.  
But I have wondered. A man who has been in danger  
When he comes out of it forgets his fears,  
And sometimes he forgets his promises. 730  
Might it not happen that your friend, intent  
Upon his own concerns again, forget  
How very much this letter means to me?

*Orestes*

And what would you suggest, to ease your mind?

*Iphigenia*

His solemn vow to take this where I say. 735

*Orestes*

And will you make a vow balancing his?

*Iphigenia*

To do what, or undo what?

*Orestes*

To make sure  
He be allowed to leave this deathly place.

*Iphigenia*

How could he keep his vow, unless he leave? 740

*Orestes*

What makes you think the king will let him sail?

*Iphigenia*

I can persuade the king and will myself  
Go to the ship and see your friend aboard.

*Orestes*

Then word the vow as you would have him make it.

*Iphigenia*

You promise the delivery of my letter?

*Pylades*

I promise the delivery of your letter.

745

*Iphigenia*

I promise you the king will let you leave.

*Pylades*

In whose name do you swear?

*Iphigenia*

By Artemis,  
Here in Her Temple—and implore Her help.

*Pylades*

And I by Zeus Himself, by Heaven's King.

*Iphigenia*

And what if you should fail to keep your word?

750

*Pylades*

Then may I never again set eyes on Argos.  
And what if you should fail in keeping yours?

*Iphigenia*

Then may I never again set foot in Argos.

*Pylades*

But we forget one possibility.

*Iphigenia*

Which might affect the keeping of your vow?

*Pylades*

How could I keep my vow if this should happen—  
If we were wrecked by a storm, torn by a reef,

755

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

If we were sunk and everything went down,  
And if my life were saved but not the letter.  
If that should happen, how could I keep my word?

*Iphigenia*

In any plan, two ways improve on one.  
So I will tell you, slowly, line by line, 760  
The contents of my letter, which, if need be,  
You are to tell my friend. Then he will know.  
For either you will place it in his hand  
And the written words will speak to him or else,  
If they are lost, your voice will be their echo. 765

*Pylades*

That is a surer way, for both of us.  
So whom am I to find for you in Argos?  
What shall I say to him?

*Iphigenia*

Say this to him.  
Say to Orestes, son of Agamemnon,  
"A greeting comes from one you think is dead." 770  
Tell him, "Your sister is not dead at Aulis  
But is alive."

*Orestes*

Alive? Iphigenia?  
Oh, no! Unless the dead come back again!

*Iphigenia*

You are looking at her now, for I am she.  
But let me finish what I ask of him.  
"O brother, come and save me from a life  
As priestess in a loathsome ritual— 775  
Save me from dying in this lonely land."

*Orestes*

Where am I, Pylades? What am I hearing?

*Iphigenia*

"Lest memory of me should always haunt you."  
The name, you must repeat it, is Orestes.

*Orestes*

I hear a God!

*Iphigenia*

You hear only a woman.

*Orestes*

I hear a woman—and I hear a God! 780  
Let me hear more! I hear a miracle!

*Iphigenia*

Then tell him, "Artemis put out Her hand  
And spared my life at Aulis, leaving a deer  
To bleed instead." And tell him this, "My father,  
Not looking when he struck, believed me dead. 785  
Artemis brought me here." The letter ends.

*Pylades*

No word was ever easier to keep!  
Lady, keep yours or not, I keep mine now! 790  
I give you this, Orestes, from your sister!

*Orestes*

How can I look at letters! Let me look—  
Oh let me stare at you whom I had lost!  
Oh let me touch you with my hands and prove 795  
That you are real and hold you close, close!

*The Third Maiden*

Do not lay hands, whoever you may be,  
Upon a vestment sacred  
To Artemis! Do not profane that robe!

*Orestes*

You are my sister, you are my father's daughter, 800

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

And nature will not let you turn away  
From your own brother given back to you.

*Iphigenia*

Ah, you would have me think that you are he.  
Orestes is not here. He is in Argos.

*Orestes*

Poor sister, not in Argos! I am here!

805

*Iphigenia*

You mean Tyndareus was your mother's father?

*Orestes*

Yes, and my father's grandfather was Pelops.

*Iphigenia*

What are you saying? How can I believe you?

*Orestes*

By asking me more questions—about home.

*Iphigenia*

Say anything—say anything at all.

810

*Orestes*

Electra used to tell us about Atreus,  
About Thyestes, how they came to quarrel.

*Iphigenia*

The fight they had over the golden lamb!

*Orestes*

The tapestry you made of it, yourself.

*Iphigenia*

Are you Orestes? Is it really you?

815



*Orestes*

Another tapestry you made, of Helios  
Changing His course. Have you forgotten that?

*Iphigenia*

I can remember every single thread.

*Orestes*

And the bath perfumes, a present for your wedding,  
Sent by your mother to Aulis—you remember?

*Iphigenia*

I live each bitter moment of that day.

*Orestes*

The lock of hair you sent back to your mother?

*Iphigenia*

I meant it for my own memorial  
To mark a grave where I could never lie.

*Orestes*

The keepsake in your room! Do you remember  
The ancient spear, the one Pelops had used  
On Oenomaus, when he won from him  
Hippodamia as a bride from Pisa?

*Iphigenia*

It is, it is! Orestes! O my brother!  
My home has come to me from far away,  
For you have come, I have you in my arms.

*Orestes*

And I have you in mine, whom I thought dead.  
No wonder that our eyes are blind with tears,  
Of joy, not sorrow—yet of sorrow too.

*Iphigenia*

You were a baby when I sailed away,

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

Lifted to watch me, held up by your nurse 835  
 To wave goodbye. And now those little arms  
 I saw reach out have come to me, grown strong  
 To comfort me! How can I tell my joy?  
 There is no language sweet enough to tell it.  
 There is no joy like this. There never was. 840

*Orestes*

And there must never be an end of it.

*Iphigenia*

I am bewildered. And I cannot think  
 What I should say, my friends. I cannot think  
 Of anything but joy—except a fear  
 That he might vanish as he came. O Argos!  
 My heart is full of my beloved Argos, 845  
 Of everybody who belongs to Argos,  
 And of my brother born and bred in Argos  
 To be a living light honoring Argos!

*Orestes*

How could the happiness we both were born for 850  
 Become unhappiness?

*Iphigenia*

Unhappiness

Began for me when my unhappy father  
 Lifted a knife and drew it toward my throat.

*Orestes*

I was not there, and yet how plain I see you!

*Iphigenia*

And do you see what I remember there? 855  
 The treachery, the misery, the shame!  
 After the trickery, the vanishing  
 Of all my dreams! Not to Achilles' arms  
 I went, circled with songs, but, shaken with sobs,

I felt the hot flame from the altar-stone  
And the cold water trickled on my head. 860

*Orestes*

O desolate daughter of a desolate father!  
I see his face. I see his haunted face!

*Iphigenia*

But why feel pity for the pitiless man  
Who caused all this? 865

*Orestes*

And might have caused today  
Your leading your own brother to the grave.

*Iphigenia*

Some God prevented. But I came so near,  
My hand so nearly set the final seal,  
That I still shake as though you lay here dead.  
We have seen the beginning of a miracle. 870  
We found each other and my hand was spared  
From signaling your death. How can we now  
Fulfil the miracle, make it complete?  
How can I save you from some other hand  
And speed you safely homeward from this place? 875  
There will be many hands, and many swords,  
For you to face. How could you match them all?  
A giant's task, too much for any man!  
There are no weapons possible but wits,  
And yet I see you stand there dazed as I. 880  
Could you outrun them when they follow you,  
Escape them on an inland wooded trail?  
Or would a dash through breakers be the way?  
Would you be safer trusting to the trail  
Or to the ship? Oh, I can see you losing 885  
Your way on land, risking a thousand deaths.  
The countryside is full of savage men.  
The ship is better, even that sharp cleft

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

Between the Clashing Rocks. Yes, risk the sea. 890  
 You challenged it, came through it. Having once  
 Met it and mastered it, you can again.  
 And so let fly your oars. Yes, risk the sea,  
 Take to the ship—though who can surely tell  
 If God or man shall steer you through the waves 895  
 To a safe landing, or if Fate shall grant  
 Argos the benison of your return?  
 Or me—who knows?—the sweet surprise of mine!

*The Third Maiden*

I have heard marvelous tales from story-tellers, 900  
 But nothing to compare  
 With this event which my own eyes have seen.

*Pylades*

Orestes, it was natural and right  
 For you and for your sister to compare  
 Old memories, but surely it's high time  
 We think of nothing else but our escape 905  
 From this grim place and how to manage it.  
 No man, when Fortune beckons him, should wait  
 A single instant. He should follow her.

*Orestes*

Meet her halfway, you mean, more than halfway, 910  
 Since every God helps him who helps himself.

*Iphigenia*

But first—I cannot wait—I have to hear!  
 Oh tell me just a word about my sister—  
 About Electra! Tell me about Electra!

*Orestes*

This is the husband who has made her happy. 915

*Iphigenia*

This man? But who. . . .

*Orestes*

A Phocian. Strophius' son.

*Iphigenia*

Then he is Atreus' grandson! He's our kinsman!

*Orestes*

Your cousin—my one friend.

*Iphigenia*

Not even born

When I left home to die.

920

*Orestes*

He is the son

Of Strophius in old age.

*Iphigenia*

I welcome you,

My sister's husband.

*Orestes*

And my more than brother.

*Iphigenia*

But oh our mother? You have not said why—

*Orestes*

I said enough—I said she killed our father.

925

*Iphigenia*

You have not told me why.

*Orestes*

Then do not ask me.

*Iphigenia*

May I not ask if you are king of Argos?

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Orestes*

Not king but exile. Menelaus is king.

*Iphigenia*

When you most needed him, he drove you out?

930

*Orestes*

Not he. The Furies—the avenging Fiends.

*Iphigenia*

Your madness on the beach—it was the Fiends?

*Orestes*

Anyone seeing me might think it madness.

*Iphigenia*

Still chasing you because you killed our mother?

*Orestes*

They try to choke me with my mother's blood!

935

*Iphigenia*

What brought you here?

*Orestes*

Phoebus—His oracle.

*Iphigenia*

Why should He choose this place?

*Orestes*

Oh let me tell

My bitter narrative from end to end.

After my hand had unforgivably  
Punished my mother's unforgivable sin,  
Down on my head they came, the Avenging Furies,  
The nameless Fiends. Then Phoebus ordered me  
To Athens that I might explain to Them

940

In the Tribunal Zeus had sanctified  
To Ares when she answered ancient charges. 945

When I arrived there, none of all my friends  
Received me. They avoided me at first  
As one unclean. Later they pitied me  
And gave me food in the same room with them  
But at a separate table where they let 950  
My meals be served when theirs were, sent me a cup  
When their love-bowl was passed, but then would turn  
Away and would not look at me nor speak  
To me—because I was a murderer. . . .  
I tried to act as though I did not care, 955  
But sad and lonely when I thought of her  
Whom I had killed, I drank a bitter cup.

I am told Athenians commemorate  
My trial with a Service of the Pitcher,  
Everyone drinking his own cup in silence. . . . 960

While I was facing judgment on that hill,  
I on one flagging and across from me  
The eldest of the Avengers charging me  
With murder, Phoebus rose to my defense.  
It was His eloquence that saved my life, 965  
Persuading Pallas, in the chair, with votes  
Cast evenly for and against me, that she add  
Her own vote for me—which acquitted me.

Some of the Fiends, persuaded, went to found  
A cellar temple under the Tribunal.  
Others denounced the verdict as unfair 970  
And flew at me in such a vicious frenzy  
That I ran back for help again from Phoebus,  
Faint with despair fell down upon my knees  
And swore to starve myself to death unless  
The God who had ruined me would rescue me. 975

Out pealed His voice over the golden tripod,  
Bidding me find among the Taurians  
Their Artemis of wood carven in Heaven  
But fallen on their coast and, stealing it,  
Establish it for Grecian worshippers

# IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

In Attica.

Help me to do this thing  
And to fulfil His mission. Help me, sister!  
Once I have carried home in these two hands 980  
The image of the Goddess, I am rid  
Of madness! And I urge you with a gift  
Of rugged rowers rowing you home to Argos!  
O my own sister, for our family's sake,  
Help me to save that family and ourselves!  
Unless you help me take the image back, 985  
This very day our family's name shall die.

*The Fourth Maiden*

Some God is visiting ancestral sin  
On the house of Tantalus.

*Iphigenia*

How I had dreamed, long, long before your coming,  
Of you and of my country! How my prayer 990  
Joins yours for the renewal of our breed—  
Even of his whose hand reached for my blood!  
Now that no blood of yours stains my own hand,  
I have no anger left, but only hope  
That in your life the family name shall live. 995  
But if you leave me, taking Artemis,  
When the king sees the empty pedestal,  
What can I say? How can my life be saved  
Unless, with one quick stroke seizing the image,  
We flee together to your leaping deck? 1000  
If we succeed, what happiness for me!  
But even if I fail, you need not fail.  
My life is little. I would gladly die  
To earn your safety and your reaching home.  
If a man die, a house, a name, is lost. 1005  
But if a woman die, what does it matter?

*Orestes*

It mattered when my mother died! If now



You also were to die because of me—!  
 Whatever happen, we shall share one fate,  
 Alive in Greece, or here together dead. 1010

But by all signs, the Gods are on our side.  
 If Artemis were not, why should it be  
 Her Brother's oracle commanding me  
 To bring Her image back? She wishes it!  
 Here in Her Temple, in Her very presence,  
 Has come the omen of my finding you! 1015  
 Yes, we are being guided by the Gods!

*Iphigenia*

The king will kill us if we steal the statue.

*Orestes*

Then why not kill the king? 1020

*Iphigenia*

Anger the Gods

Again? He has been kind to me.

*Orestes*

Why not,

To save our lives, take chances with the Gods?

*Iphigenia*

I like your boldness. But it cannot be.

*Orestes*

What if you hid me somewhere in the temple?

*Iphigenia*

To steal out after dark? 1025

*Orestes*

Since I must steal,

The day for honest men, the night for thieves.

*Iphigenia*

Guards are on watch inside.

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Orestes*

How else are we—

*Iphigenia*

We might—

*Orestes*

Might what?

1030

*Iphigenia*

Make use of your misfortune.

*Orestes*

Women have ways of changing ill to good.

*Iphigenia*

I shall denounce you as a matricide.

*Orestes*

Make use of any good you find in that.

*Iphigenia*

As one unworthy to be sacrificed.

1035

*Orestes*

I understand—but not how it would serve us.

*Iphigenia*

You are unclean—cannot be purified—

*Orestes*

What will that do for us?

*Iphigenia*

except by deep  
Sea-water, beyond stain, off from the shore.

*Orestes*

Yes, but our mission, you forget the statue—  
The reason for our coming here.

1040

*Iphigenia*

She too,

Having been soiled by your approach, must be  
Washed clean, the image too!

*Orestes*

I see it now.

The inlet where the ship—

*Iphigenia*

strains at the leash.

*Orestes*

And you will bring the image there yourself!

*Iphigenia*

Nobody ever touches it but me.

1045

*Orestes*

But Pylades? Is he a murderer too?

*Iphigenia*

He aided you. He also must be cleansed.

Orestes

A story for the guards—but for the king?

*Iphigenia*

In any case I could not keep it from him.  
So he shall hear it and shall be persuaded.

*Orestes*

Fifty stout oars are waiting for the word.

1050

*Iphigenia*

That is the part of it I leave to you.

Orestes

I have but one suggestion. Do these women

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

Realize how much their loyalty might mean?  
 Women know women. Make your plea to them.  
 And after that we are in the hands of Heaven. 1055

*Iphigenia*

O friends who have been near and dear to me,  
 It may depend upon your carefulness  
 Whether or not I reach my home and kin.  
 A woman knows how much her weakness needs  
 The sympathy and help of other women, 1060  
 Their understanding and their loyalty.  
 I ask you only this, that you say nothing  
 Of what has happened here, that you keep silent.  
 The stillest tongue can be the truest friend.  
 We three must take a hair's-breadth chance between 1065  
 Capture and death, deliverance and home.  
 But if we do escape, then we shall work  
 For your deliverance, for you and you  
 To share our happiness at home in Hellas  
 And you and you. Holding your hand, I ask you— 1070  
 Kissing your cheek. Claspings your knees, I ask you—  
 And you I ask by love of your two parents.

(*To the Second Maiden.*)

And you by love of the child you left behind.  
 Who will say yes to me? Who could say no  
 When it might cost my brother's life and mine?

*The First Maiden*

Rely on me, dear Lady.

*The Second Maiden*

And on me. 1075

*The Third Maiden*

We shall do everything we can to help.

*The Fourth Maiden*

By Zeus we pledge silence and loyalty.

*Iphigenia*

May Heaven reward the hearts behind those words!

(*To Orestes and Pylades.*)

Now for your part—and yours—inside the temple.  
The king will soon arrive and will be asking 1080  
Whether the strangers have been sacrificed.

(*Orestes and Pylades enter the temple.*)

O gallant Goddess, having saved me once  
At Aulis from my father's deadly hand,  
Save with me now my brother and his friend,  
Lest Phoebus be disproved because of Thee  
And men forsake His oracle. O come 1085  
In gracious might away from this bleak place,  
Away from gloom, to the lovely light of Athens.

(*She follows into the temple.*)

*The First Maiden*

O sad-voiced ocean-bird, heard in the foam  
Low by the rocky ledge 1090  
Singing a note unhappy hearts can hear,  
The song of separation from your mate,  
The moan of separation,  
I have no wings to seek like you, but I  
Can sing a song like you, 1095  
A song of separation from my mate.

*The Second Maiden*

At home in Hellas now my kinsmen gather  
Where Artemis is due  
To bless the new-born from her Cynthian hill  
And soothe the mothers with the cooling palm  
And bay and olive-tree, 1100  
Where once Latona loved the winding streams  
And watched the rounded pools  
White with the song-like motion of the swans. 1105

*The Third Maiden*

Alas, the falling tears, the towers fallen,  
 The taking of our towns!  
 Alas, the clang of bright and angry spears  
 Which drove me, captive, to an alien ship, 1110  
 Whence I was sold away  
 To be an exile here, a handmaiden  
 With Agamemnon's daughter,  
 Doomed to the bloody rites of Artemis! 1115

*The Fourth Maiden*

And at this altar where the sacrifice  
 Is not of sheep but men,  
 I envy those unhappy from their birth,  
 For to be bred and seasoned in misfortune  
 Is to be iron to it,  
 But there is something in the pang of change 1120  
 More than the heart can bear,  
 Unhappiness remembering happiness.

*The Second Maiden*

Lady, a ship is here to take you home,  
 And in the rowers' ears  
 Pan shall be sounding all his pointed notes, 1125  
 Great mountains echoing to His little reed,  
 And Phoebus on His lyre  
 Shall strike profound the seven strings and sing  
 To you of Attica, 1130  
 Shall sing to you of home and lead you there.  
 Oar after oar shall dip and carry you,  
 Lady, away from us,  
 Oar after oar shall push the empty waves  
 Wider, wider, leaving us lonely here,  
 Leaving us here without you,  
 And forward over the unceasing bow  
 The sail shall faster run, 1135  
 Ever refilling with the unspent wind.

*The First Maiden*

Oh to fly swifter than the wingèd sun  
 Upon his dazzling track!—  
 And not to let my golden light be folded 1140  
 Until I touch my house, my roof, my room,  
 From which I used to go  
 To noble marriages and take my place  
 In the bright company,  
 Give them my hands and circle round and dance 1145  
 And always try to be the loveliest,  
 Under my mother's gaze,  
 In my unrivaled radiance of attire  
 And in the motion of my hands and feet,  
 While my embroidered veil  
 I would hold closely round me as I danced  
 And bowed and hid my cheek 1150  
 Under the shadow of my clustering curls.

*(Enter King Thoas with Soldiers.)*

*Thoas*

Where is my guardian of the temple gate,  
 My Grecian girl? Where are the foreigners?  
 Am I too late to see the sacrifice?  
 Are the victims' bodies being burnt already? 1155

*The Fourth Maiden*

She is coming out herself and she will tell you.

*(Iphigenia appears in the temple-door, carrying  
 the wooden Artemis.)*

*Thoas*

*(Starting up the stairs.)*

What does this mean, daughter of Agamemnon?  
 Why have you moved the Goddess from her place?

*Iphigenia*

O King, stand back—stay back beyond the threshold!

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Thoas*

But what has happened that would call for this? 1160

*Iphigenia*

Back from contamination! I am abrupt.

*Thoas*

Speak bluntly to me. What?

*Iphigenia*

The offerings  
You sent us for the Goddess are impure.

*Thoas*

How do you know? What makes you think—

*Iphigenia*

She turned  
Away from them. She moved when they came near. 1165

*Thoas*

Mightn't it be a little bit of earthquake  
That moved Her?

*Iphigenia*

No. She moved of Her own will  
And even for a moment shut Her eyes.

*Thoas*

Because their hands were blood-stained? Was it that?

*Iphigenia*

It was Her divination of their guilt.

*Thoas*

You mean they'd killed a Taurian on the beach? 1170

*Iphigenia*

Their guilt was with them when they came—the crime  
Of killing their own kin.



*Thoas*

What kin?

*Iphigenia*

Mother

Of one of them—a murder they had planned.

*Thoas*

O great Apollo, what barbarian

Would do the thing these Greeks have done!

*Iphigenia*

Greeks once

But now disowned by Greeks, driven from Hellas. 1175

*Thoas*

Even so, why bring the Goddess out?

*Iphigenia*

Defiled,

She must be purified, be cleaned again

By the touch of Her own sky.

*Thoas*

How could you know

What sort of crime these fellows had committed?

*Iphigenia*

I saw Her turn from them. I asked them why.

*Thoas*

You are a Greek, quick-witted, a true Greek.

1180

*Iphigenia*

They are Greek too, tried to propitiate me

With welcome news.

*Thoas*

Of Argos?

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Iphigenia*

Of my brother,  
News of Orestes.

*Thoas*

Thought they could weaken you.

*Iphigenia*

News that my father is alive and prospers. 1185

*Thoas*

But you were firm. You didn't let your feelings—

*Iphigenia*

What should I feel toward any Greek but hate?

*Thoas*

How shall we deal with them?

*Iphigenia*

By temple rules.

*Thoas*

Something besides the pitcher and the knife? 1190

*Iphigenia*

Complete immersion, for a sin like theirs.

*Thoas*

In the bubbling spring? Or is salt water best?

*Iphigenia*

The sea is the absorbent of all evil.

*Thoas*

Artemis says the sea?

*Iphigenia*

I say the sea.

1195

*Thoas*

Breakers are handy—just beyond the wall.

*Iphigenia*

But these especial rites are secret rites.

*Thoas*

Then choose your place; no one shall trespass on you.

*Iphigenia*

And I shall have to wash the Goddess too.

*Thoas*

Can a Goddess be defiled, the same as people?

1200

*Iphigenia*

Why did I have to bring Her from the temple?

*Thoas*

You are a pious woman and I thank you.

*Iphigenia*

Then will you issue orders for me?

*Thoas*

Name them.

*Iphigenia*

First have the strangers bound with rope.

*Thoas*

But why?

Where could they go?

*Iphigenia*

O King, beware of Greeks!

*Thoas*

(*To his Soldiers.*)

Bind them.

1205

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Iphigenia*

And have them brought to me.

*Thoas*

And bring them.

*Iphigenia*

But cover both their heads with heavy cloth.

*Thoas*

To keep even the Sun from seeing them?

*Iphigenia*

Send soldiers with me.

*Thoas*

Take your pick of them.

*Iphigenia*

And have a herald tell all Taurians—

*Thoas*

To what?

*Iphigenia*

To stay indoors till this is done.

1210

*Thoas*

One step outdoors and they would be polluted.

*Iphigenia*

By matricide!

*Thoas*

(*To Attendants.*)

Go tell the herald this.

*Iphigenia*

Indoors they stay.

*Thoas*

My people do concern you!

*Iphigenia*

The one I am most concerned about—

*Thoas*

Who? Me?

*Iphigenia*

Has helpful work to do, inside the temple.

1215

*Thoas*

To—?

*Iphigenia*

Purify it with pine smoke from torches.

*Thoas*

The temple shall be sweet for your return.

*Iphigenia*

When they come out—

*Thoas*

What shall I do?

*Iphigenia*

Hold up

Your sleeve and shield your face.

*Thoas*

From the contagion.

*Iphigenia*

And if I seem delayed—

*Thoas*

How shall I tell?

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Iphigenia*

Feel no surprise, be patient.

*Thoas*

You must do,  
Carefully, everything the Goddess wants.

1220

*Iphigenia*

I trust that I can serve Her wish.

*Thoas*

And mine.

*(The temple doors open for an emerging procession.)*

*Iphigenia*

And here they come, the strangers in their robes,  
And lambs whose blood is used instead of theirs,  
And burning torches and the instruments  
Needed for purifying them and Her.

1225

Taurians, turn away from the pollution.  
Gate-tenders, open the gates, then wash your hands.  
Men who want wives, women who want children,  
Avoid contagion, keep away, away!

*(Holding the image high.)*

O Virgin Goddess, if the waves can wash  
And purge the taint from these two murderers  
And wash from Thee the tarnishing of blood,  
Thy dwelling shall be clean and we be blest! . . .  
To Thee and the All-Wise my silent prayer.

1230

*(She signals. The procession moves down the stairs. Carrying the image, she leads the Soldiers and victims from the foot of the stairs across the court and out toward the sea. Thoas enters the temple with Attendants, leaving in the courtyard only the Temple Maidens.)*

*The Second Maiden*

Latona bore one day a golden Child,

Brother of Artemis,  
Phoebus, the darling of the vales of Delos— 1235

*The First Maiden*

Whose little fingers hovered on the harp  
And pulled at archery.

*The Second Maiden*

Up from His birthplace, to Parnassus' top  
The Mother brought Her Boy— 1240

*The First Maiden*

Where Dionysus vaults the waterfall.

*The Third Maiden*

There, hidden coiling in the leafy laurels,  
A serpent with bright scales 1245  
And blood-red eyes, a creature born of Earth,  
Guarded the cave that held Earth's oracle.  
Phoebus, beholding it, leaped up  
Out of His Mother's arms, a little Child, 1250  
And struck the serpent dead—

*The Second Maiden*

And on that day began His prophecies.

*The Fourth Maiden*

O Phoebus, having won the golden throne  
And tripod of the truth,  
Out of the very center of the Earth,  
Thou couldst hear wisdom; and Thy voice conveyed,  
Accompanied by all 1255  
The run and ripple of Castalian springs,  
The deepest prophecies  
That ever Earth heard whispered out of Heaven.

*The Third Maiden*

But Earth had wished to save the oracle

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

For Themis, Her own daughter, 1260  
 And so in anger bred a band of dreams  
 Which in the night should be oracular  
 To men, foretelling truth. 1265  
 And this impaired the dignity of Phoebus  
 And of His prophecies.

*The Second Maiden*

And the baby God went hurrying to Zeus, 1270  
 Coaxed with His little hands and begged of Zeus  
 To send the dreams away.

*The First Maiden*

And Zeus was very pleased to have His Son  
 Come straight to Him with troubles. His great brow 1275  
 Decided with a nod  
 That Phoebus have his prize restored to Him,  
 In spite of angry Earth,  
 His throne, His listening throng, His golden voice . . .

*The Fourth Maiden*

That throats of night be stricken straightway mute 1280  
 And plague mankind no more,  
 That shapes of night no longer hold their power  
 To foretell truth in syllables of gloom  
 And haunt men's aching hearts—  
 That men be freed from the prophetic dark  
 And every shrouded form  
 And listen only to the lips of light.

*A Soldier*

(*Entering headlong on the sea-path, wounded  
 and breathless.*)

O temple ministrants and temple guards,  
 Where is King Thoas? Open all your gates 1285  
 And call King Thoas out! Summon the king!

*The First Maiden*

Am I allowed to ask why so much noise?



*The Soldier*

The two young prisoners have broken free,  
With Agamemnon's daughter joining them,  
And are taking Artemis aboard their ship! 1290

*The Second Maiden*

You have gone mad to dream of such a thing!

*The First Maiden*

A likely story! If you want the king,  
He has left the temple. Go and look for him.

*The Soldier*

Tell me which way, because I have to find him. 1295

*The First Maiden*

I do not know which way.

*The Third Maiden*

None of us noticed.

*The Second Maiden*

Go look for him, tell him your crazy story.

*The Soldier*

O treacherous women, you're deceiving me,  
You're in the plot yourselves! 1300

*The Third Maiden*

You make no sense.  
What are these men to us? Go try the palace.

*The Soldier*

Not till I know what's happening right here.  
Not till the keepers of the inner shrine  
Have answered me! Ho! You inside! Unbar

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

The door! Is the king there? Tell him to hurry! 1305  
Tell him a soldier's out here—with bad news.

*(He beats at the door. The door opens and  
Thoas appears.)*

*Thoas*

Why are you making this ungodly uproar?  
Everyone's in a panic!

*The Soldier*

These women lied!  
They said that you had left, they lied to me, 1310  
Tried not to let me find you!

*Thoas*

What do you mean?  
Why should they wish—

*The Soldier*

That will come later. Listen,  
Oh listen first to me, listen to this!  
Your Priestess, Iphigenia! She has freed  
The prisoners! They've stolen Artemis! 1315  
The ocean ceremony was a trick.

*Thoas*

But why should she be playing tricks on me?

*The Soldier*

To save Orestes. Yes, I said Orestes!

*Thoas*

Orestes? What Orestes? Not her brother?

*The Soldier*

Whom we had brought to you for Artemis. 1320

*Thoas*

But that's impossible! How can I grasp it?

*The Soldier*

There isn't time to grasp it! You must say  
 What's to be done about it! You must order  
 Galleys to cut ahead of them and catch them!

*Thoas*

There's no escape for them. Our boats are out there, 1325  
 So tell me how it happened. Everything.

*The Soldier*

It was just when we had reached the bend of shore  
 Hiding their ship that Agamemnon's daughter  
 Made signs for us to drop the rope which bound  
 The men, to leave them and fall back. She said 1330  
 That she was ready to begin the rites  
 And light the mystic flame to bless the sea.  
 But when she took the cord and led the boys  
 Beyond the curve, we had a sudden feeling  
 Something was wrong. We didn't know what to do. 1335  
 We heard her voice call high mysterious words  
 We'd never heard and thought that this must be  
 The prayer she had to use for cleansing sin.  
 And then we waited a long time. At last 1340  
 We were afraid the men had broken loose  
 And killed her and escaped. And still we waited,  
 Because you had forbidden us to look,  
 But we suddenly decided to find out  
 And hurried to the inlet. 1345

There we saw

The ship from Hellas swaying near the beach,  
 And fitted in the tholes were fifty oars  
 Like feathers in a wing. And the two youths  
 Were waist-deep by the stern. Sailors held poles  
 For keeping the bow steady, others hauled 1350  
 The anchor up. The rest had hands along the ropes  
 Of a ladder hanging from the rail to help  
 The Priestess. But we seized her in the water, 1355  
 Tugged at the ladder, ripped their rudder-oar

Away from them to cripple them and cried  
 To the fellow facing us, "What kind of man  
 Are you, stealing our Priestess and our Goddess?" 1360  
 "I am Orestes, son of Agamemnon,  
 I am her brother! Now you have the truth!  
 And she is bound for Greece, out of which land  
 I lost her long ago—bound home!" We tried  
 To hold her, tried to drag her from their hands, 1365  
 Which is the way I came by this and this.  
 He struck my face, first one side, then the other.  
 They had no weapons, we had none. We used  
 Our fists and they their fists, and some their feet  
 With kicks well-aimed at us from where they stood  
 Above us—at our heads and hearts. We fought 1370  
 And fought till we were winded. Then, with bruises  
 And cuts and blood-filled eyes, we climbed the cliff  
 And from above we pelted them with rocks. 1375  
 But the Greek archers had brought up their bows  
 And with their arrows kept us at a distance.

Then when a giant wave bore in on them,  
 Orestes quickly lifted up his sister  
 Out of the rush of it. Holding her high 1380  
 On his left shoulder, plunging stride by stride,  
 He caught a ladder, climbed aboard the ship  
 And set her safe on deck. And she, she held—  
 She had it still—the statue out of Heaven,  
 The image of the Daughter of High Zeus. 1385

We heard a glad voice ringing through the ship,  
 "O mariners of Hellas, grip your oars  
 And clip the sea to foam! O let your arms  
 Be strong, for we have won, have won, have won  
 What we set out to win! Soon we shall leave  
 The jagged Clashing Rocks behind! Pull hard!"

A shout of joy resounded and the ship 1390  
 Quivered with dipping oars and shot ahead.  
 But this was only while the shelter lasted;  
 For at the harbor-mouth the sharp wind threw her  
 High on a heavy swell shoreward again.

Her oarsmen rallied, strained, but every time  
 They made a gain, a great wave drove her back. 1395  
 Then Agamemnon's daughter stood and prayed:  
 "Oh save me, Artemis, from this grim place!  
 Help us all home to Hellas! And forgive  
 Theft of the image at Thy Brother's bidding!  
 As He is dear to Thee, so mine to me!" 1400

The sailors roared their echoes to her prayer,  
 And bent their bodies and their great bare arms  
 And shoulders, swinging like the sea,  
 To the boatswain's cry. But closer to the cliff, 1405  
 Closer they drew and closer still. And some  
 Sprang out into the water and began  
 Trying to fasten hold on the sharp rocks  
 With ropes. And then our soldiers sent me here  
 To tell you what has happened. So bring cord 1410  
 And chains, O King, for if the sea stays rough,  
 There's not a chance that they can get away.

Poseidon, Ocean's God, mindful of Troy,  
 The city which He loved, is punishing 1415  
 The impious children of her enemies,  
 And will deliver to the King of Tauris  
 The son and daughter of the King of Argos—  
 That daughter who, forgetful now of Aulis,  
 Betrays the Goddess who was good to her.

*The First Maiden*

O Lady, Lady! Fate is yielding you 1420  
 To Taurian hands again.  
 You and your brother surely now shall die.

*Thoas*

Come, citizens, and be uncivilized!  
 Leap on your horses! Whip them to the beach!  
 There we can wait until a billow splits  
 That ship from Hellas. Then go after them! 1425  
 And hunt them down, every damned dog of them!  
 Do this for Artemis. And some of you

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

Go launch my galleys, lest one man of them  
Should die untortured! Run them down by sea  
And land! Go hurl them from the cliffs!  
Oh catch them, crush them, crucify them—kill them! 1430

And as for you, you miserable women,  
Count on the punishment which you have earned  
By treachery! That punishment can wait—  
With this to do. But oh when this is done!

*(Above the confusion appears, with instant  
dominion, Pallas Athena.)*

*Athena*

Quiet, King Thoas! What is all this tumult? 1435  
Hold the chase back and listen to Athena.  
Hold all your soldiers back. Yes, all of them.

Apollo sent Orestes to your country  
To set him free from the Avenging Furies,  
Ordered him, through an oracle, to bring 1440  
Iphigenia home again to Argos

And the sacred statue home to Her own land.  
You have the story. But there's one addition—  
The fact that this Orestes you would hunt  
Is gliding on a comfortable sea.  
Poseidon made it smooth. I asked Him to. 1445

Orestes! Gods are heard at any distance.  
Though you are far away, you still can hear me.  
Do this. Take back your sister and the statue  
Safely to Hellas. Pause at God-built Athens.  
Then, passing through, continue to the end 1450  
Of Attica and find a holy place  
Close to Carystus' hill, a place called Halae.  
There build a temple. There set up the image,  
That men may flock to Her with happy hymns.  
Name it for Tauris, to immortalize  
Your flight from home, your rescue from the Furies,  
Your penitence and your deliverance. 1455

And let this be the law. When they observe  
Her festival, the priest shall hold,

In memory of you, the sharp blade of his knife  
 Against a human throat and draw one drop  
 Of blood, then stop—this in no disrespect  
 But a grave reminder of Her former ways. 1460

Iphigenia! Steps are cut in rock  
 At Brauron for a shrine to Artemis.  
 You shall reside as keeper of the keys there  
 And at your death you shall be buried there  
 And honored in your tomb with spotless gifts,  
 Garments unworn, woven by hands of women 1465  
 Who honorably died in giving birth.

These loyal maidens, Thoas, I command you  
 To send back home.

Orestes, once I saved you  
 When I was arbiter on Ares' hill  
 And broke the tie by voting in your favor. 1470  
 Now let it be the law that one who earns  
 An evenly divided verdict wins  
 His case. Therefore go safely from this land,  
 O son of Agamemnon. And you, Thoas,  
 Enjoy the taste of swallowing your wrath.

*Thoas*

The man who thinks he ever stood a chance  
 Against the Gods was born a fool. And so  
 I hold no slightest grievance toward Orestes  
 Or Iphigenia. They may keep the statue.  
 There isn't even any dignity  
 In challenging a God. So off with them. 1480  
 May Artemis be happy in their land.

I bid these women also, since I have to,  
 A pleasant trip to Hellas. Thy word holds  
 For all my captains too. Call back the galleys!  
 Here are my spirit—and my spear—bowed down. 1485

*Athena*

In doing as you must, you learn a law  
 Binding on Gods as well as upon men.

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IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

O winds of Heaven, speed Orestes home,  
And I will guide him on his way to Athens  
And will save Thy likeness, Artemis, my Sister.

*The First Maiden*

Smooth seas to them and may their journey's end  
Become unending joy! 1490

*The Fourth Maiden*

Pallas Athena, let us prove Thy name  
As hallowed upon earth as in high Heaven.

*The Third Maiden*

And let us take to heart  
Thy unexpected but so welcome words. 1495

*The Second Maiden*

Command us with Thy grace,  
O Conqueror of anger and of fear,  
Award us wiser ways.

*The First Maiden*

Undo our troubled guile, crown us with Truth. 1499





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